

The Clue of Life: Translating Feuerbach in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

Saswati Halder

Associate Professor, Department of English, Jadavpur University.

Email: saswathalder@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The central preoccupation of George Eliot's life was with religion. In her novels she searched for a view of life that would give modern man a sense of purpose, dignity and ethical direction. On reading Eliot's novels with the knowledge of her intellectual development, one must ask how this earnest agnostic could treat traditional religion so sympathetically, why she made the religious experience the subject of her creative work, and what moral truth she found religion to embody. It was the philosophy of the German anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach, whose book *The Essence of Christianity* she translated in 1854, in combination with her own earlier experiences as a Christian, which led Eliot to her understanding of the subjective reality embodied in Christianity. 'With the ideas of Feuerbach,' Eliot wrote, 'I everywhere agree' (Haight, 1954-55, p.153). My paper attempts to show how the influence of Feuerbach achieves complexity and vitality in Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* and how Eliot establishes her faith in firm and lasting relations, which could be attained through the adjustment of the individual to the community. This adjustment comes as a corollary to the protagonist's realization of the principles that promote love, respect, tolerance and sacrifice for others.

Keywords: religious humanism, suffering of love, Feuerbach

The fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependant on conceptions of what is not man; and that the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human i.e. an exaltation of the human. (Haight, 1954-55, p.98)

The Victorian Age was an age of inquiry; the Victorians began questioning society, gender roles, knowledge, and even religion. Society was changing, and George Eliot is both a product of these new ideas, influenced by the scientists and intellects of her time, and a contributor to new thought and literature. She became involved in the Higher Criticism movement that grew out of the investigatory age and viewed her rejection of Christianity as necessary, looking for a surer basis on which to ground belief. Others who confronted the discrepancies in the Bible were moved to deny new knowledge and despair over their loss, but Eliot emerges with a stronger alternative, religious humanism, which combined the realities of science with the best parts of Christianity. George Willis Cooke (1883) describes what is "singular about George Eliot's position":

“she both affirms and denies; she is deeply religious and yet rejects all religious doctrines. No writer of the century has given religion a more important relation to human interests or made it a larger element in this creative work; and yet no other literary artist has so completely rejected all positive belief in God and immortality” (p. 221).

Charles C. Hennell and David Friedrich Strauss had been metaphysical in their examination of the enduring truths contained in Christianity. Neither, as a consequence, had delved deeply into the psychological sources of Christian belief. It was the philosophy of the German anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach, whose book *The Essence of Christianity* Eliot translated in 1854, in combination with her own earlier experiences as a Christian, which led her to an understanding of the subjective reality embodied in Christianity – the perennial truth of human love and selflessness. “With the ideas of Feuerbach,” Eliot wrote, “I everywhere agree” (Haight, 1954-55, p.153). Cooke regards Ludwig Feuerbach as the strongest influence on George Eliot, asserting that:

The influence of Feuerbach is to be seen in the profound interest which Marian Evans ever took in the subject of religion. That influence alone explains how it was possible for one who did not accept any religious doctrines as true, who did not believe in God or immortality, and who rejected Christianity as a historic or dogmatic faith, to accept so much as she did of the better spirit of religion and to be so keenly in sympathy with it ... It was from Feuerbach she learned how great is the influence of religion, how necessary it is to man’s welfare, and how profoundly it answers to the wants of the soul. (p. 27)

We must view *The Essence of Christianity* both as a translation and a representation of Eliot’s philosophy. Clearly she was influenced by Feuerbach, who gave her the courage to enter into a free union with George Henry Lewes, christening it a marriage based on their mutual love and understanding. But she also took creative license in the translation, intermingling her own ideas and editorial overrides and alterations, and so what was presented to England at large was a text of Higher Criticism as much Eliot’s as Feuerbach’s. Her religion of humanity was formulated, and later, Eliot was seen translating Feuerbach’s anthropology into the world of her novels.

My paper will consider some of the influences of Ludwig Feuerbach on Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and analyze how they achieve complexity and vitality in the world of St. Ogg’s. George Eliot did not believe in God or immortality. She rejected Christianity as a historic or dogmatic faith. But I would like to show what she finally put in the place of God, thereby establishing her faith in firm and lasting relations, which could be attained through the adjustment of the individual to the community. This adjustment comes as a corollary to the protagonist’s realization of the principles that promote love, respect, tolerance and sacrifice for others.

The Mill on the Floss, published only a year after *Adam Bede*, in 1860, steers us along the course of the Tulliver family’s misfortune, showing us their sorrows which are never entirely overcome until they are washed away with the flood. As George Levine (1970) aptly describes it:

The novel develops as Tom and Maggie grow: it sets them within the framework of a family and society which extensively determine what they become, shows the inevitable development of their characters according to the pressures of heredity and irrevocable events, and traces their destinies chronologically from love, to division, to unity in death. (p. 110)

Eliot’s primary theme is the force of nature, which is both restorative and destructive. “Nature repairs her ravages – but not all”, (Eliot, 1996, p. 543) and the novel focuses on how people survive and overcome. The novel is an exploration of Feuerbach’s assertion that strong

relationships, motivated by a generous, unegoistic love, can repair some of the damage that circumstances have thrust upon us or the wounds we inflict by our own imperfections: "Love ... is the substantial bond, the principle of reconciliation between the perfect and the imperfect, the sinless and the sinful being, the universal and the individual, the divine and the human" (Feuerbach, 2008, p. 41).

Eliot stated that the characters in *The Mill on the Floss* generally represented a lower level of humanity than those in *Adam Bede*. F. R. Leavis sees Maggie's emotional and spiritual stresses as belonging to a stage of development where the capacity to make essential distinctions has not been arrived at. Even the citizens of St. Oggs' according to George Levine, lack the clarity of vision Feuerbach desiderated. They are therefore unable to make the right choice:

Quite deliberately, she was creating a society which has not yet moved beyond the egoism of man's animal beginnings to the sympathy and benevolence which Feuerbach and Comte believed would grow out of egoism. Among other things, the frequency with which all the characters are compared to insects and animals makes plain that George Eliot does not see them as ready for any but the slightest advance toward the full intellectual and moral development from egoism to intelligent sympathy towards which she aspired. (p. 113)

The Dodsons and the Tullivers are the dramatic embodiments of St. Oggs' essential nature and their oppressive narrowness creates a tension for both readers and characters. Eliot delivers a harsh indictment on the religion of the Dodsons and Tullivers:

Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather of a pagan kind: their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet towards something beautiful, great, or noble: you are irritated with these dull men and women ... (Eliot, 1996, p. 284)

It is this sort of Christianity with no introspection or study, this pettiness, narrowness, paganism, gossip, stinginess, the total absence of all spirituality in the British farmer circles, that weighed upon George Eliot. They fail to see the real relation of things and are unable to understand the unchangeable order of the world. As George Levine has observed:

George Eliot saw with Feuerbach that society included not merely rigid conventions but also the slowly, painfully earned developments in man's intelligence and sensibility. Maggie, then, must learn what other characters suffer by not learning – that everything must be judged on its unique merits, that no laws, habits, or traditions can apply indiscriminately in all situations. On the other hand, much of what she does learn in this way turns out to be a relearning of the values already implicit in social conventions. Dodsons and Tullivers fail to establish an adequate relation to their own traditions and are therefore unable to understand their own motives derived from myriad causes out of the past. (p. 113)

On the one hand, Maggie must transcend such unthinking adherence to tradition if she is to rise above "the mental level of the generation before her". On the other hand, she is tied to that generation "by the strongest fibres" of her heart. In "the onward tendency of human beings", (Eliot, 1996, p. 284) the Dodsons and Tullivers must go, but they cannot be ignored and they must, indeed, be loved. Such a focus on family is related directly to Feuerbach's idea that the

family is the primary means by which man can transcend his egoism and animality. Participated life, he feels, is the true, self-satisfying, divine life, “the supernatural mystery of the Trinity”: “Solitude is the want of the thinker, society the want of the heart. We can think alone, but we can love only with another. In love we are dependent, for it is the need of another being” (p. 57).

According to Feuerbach, man’s being is characterized by specific determinations or attributes namely Reason, Will and Affection. As the essential attributes of the human species, they are infinite, absolute or as Feuerbach says, “true, perfect, divine” (p. 3). In their totality, they make up the complete nature of the human being. Feuerbach calls reason the “light of the intellect”, will the “energy of character”, and affection “love”. It is important to realize that man cannot exist apart from these determinations. They are rather his being itself. They are the “constituent elements of his nature, which he neither has nor makes, the animating, determining, governing powers – divine, absolute powers – to which he can oppose no resistance” (p. 2). Concerning this point, Feuerbach asks: “Is it man that possesses love, or is it not much rather love that possesses man?” (p. 3). Love, or affection, being one of the essential powers and perfections of the human nature, goes into the making of the beings which we are. Thus to exist as human is necessarily to love, to think and to act. The duality in *The Mill on the Floss* is between two radically different kinds of characters. While Tom represents utilitarianism, and remains permanently trapped in the confines of the egoistic self, Maggie, with her loving nature strives, though imperfectly, toward Feuerbachian values. Tom develops a sense of honour, and may be seen as acting unselfishly when he saves his earnings to rescue his family’s reputation. But by Feuerbach’s standards, his approach to life is in many ways flawed. Feuerbach says: “No man is sufficient for the law which moral perfection sets before us; but, for that reason, neither is the law sufficient for man, for the heart. The law condemns; the heart has compassion even on the sinner” (p. 47). Tom is motivated by practical considerations but also, contrary to Feuerbachian compassion, he is guided impractically by hatred. For instance, he takes up his father’s grudge against the lawyer, Wakem, extending it to Wakem’s deformed son, Philip, who was his former schoolmate at Mr. Stelling’s. He is like Adam Bede in his strong will, morality of purpose, narrow imagination and intellect, power of self-control and an inclination to exercise control over others. But he lacks Adam’s power of loving and subordinates love to duty.

Maggie’s life can be seen as an “amalgam of opposing elements, her life a chronicle of collisions” (Bushnell, 1984, p. 388). We are told that the “need of being loved” was the “strongest in poor Maggie’s nature”, and that she “rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse” (Eliot, 1996, p. 41). She is intense and earnest. Her primary weakness is an inability to reel in her feelings, whereas many of the other characters, including her brother Tom, have little compassion and can hardly exert any energy to control it. Feuerbach points out that “the negation or annulling of sin is the negation of abstract moral rectitude, – the positing of love, mercy, sensuous life” (p. 42). Only sensuous living beings, and not abstract beings, are merciful. His conception of mercy as the “justice of sensuous life” (p. 42) is epitomized in George Eliot’s presentation of Maggie. In Eliot’s opinion:

If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error – error that is anguish to its own nobleness – then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology. (Haight, 1954-55, p. 318)

Maggie and Tom are quickly forced to grow up after Tulliver loses his fortune; the subsequent suffering forever defines the family. Peoples’ reactions to the crisis are telling. The Dodson sisters, despite their devotion to kin, are reluctant to help their sister, and only buy what

is necessary from the house auction. However, Eliot, like Feuerbach, believed that humans were inherently good. The narrator describes “the primitive love that knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us, in their times of helplessness and anguish” (p. 175), implying love and sympathy are programmed into human beings. Bob Jakin emerges from the woodwork to offer his savings to the family. Though Maggie and Tom decline the sovereigns, this offer of friendship is invaluable to them. Mrs. Stelling is moved by the grieving siblings. Her small act of sympathy introduces Maggie to “that new sense which is the gift of sorrow – that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship, as to haggard men among the icebergs the mere presence of an ordinary comrade stirs the deep fountains of affection” (p. 167). Maggie and Tom’s most tender moments, such as the nuzzling of noses, establishes our need for human fellowship and attempts to reconnect ourselves to our most basic impulses, to our place in the world as rational animals.

Following the impoverishment and humiliation of her family, Maggie “wanted some key that would enable her to understand and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart” (p. 298). She has an intellectual curiosity similar to Eliot’s when she was a girl; she is always eager for new books, even reading the dictionary to ease her starvation for knowledge. “Her soul’s hunger” (p. 251), devours Thomas a Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*. Essentially, Kempis’s philosophy accords with Feuerbach’s notion of the suffering God, that is, the virtue of self-sacrifice for the good of others and the giving up of egoism: “Love attests itself by suffering ... the suffering of the innocent, endured purely for the good of others, the suffering of love – self-sacrifice” (pp. 50-51). Bernard J. Paris (1970) describes the beneficial influence of *The Imitation of Christ* upon Maggie as “an excellent example of how Christian experience of the past can be living truth in the present, despite the fact that the form in which it was cast is now alien” (p. 110). Maggie finds religion, but it is not organized; it is an individual calling, “without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides – for they were not at hand, and her need was pressing” (Eliot, 1996, pp. 304-305). The book teaches Maggie about the duty she owes to others, and that her life is “an insignificant part of divinely-guided whole” (p. 302). She immediately judges herself as recklessly selfish, believing her whole life has been motivated by self-gratification. She renounces her other books and throws herself into divine devotion. Feuerbach himself emphasized not only the need to subordinate selfish desire to altruistic feeling, but human development i.e. the need for human beings to fully realize their powers. But Maggie is excessive in her renunciation:

From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and willfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity. And so it came to pass that she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act; she often strove after too high a flight, and came down with her poor little half-fledged wings dabbled in the mud. (p. 305)

Bitter experience teaches Maggie the sorrow that accompanies renunciation, but she fails to recognise that the denial of egoism does not require a denial of self-hood, a refusal to be loved, to enter into relationships of love. Rosemarie Bodenheimer (1994) comments, “It is often difficult to know whether the narrative endorses Maggie’s sacrificial thoughts on behalf of others or whether they are presented as Maggie’s way of describing to herself what she most wants or needs to do” (p. 109). In my reading of the novel, it is clear that the narrator represents Maggie’s sacrificial thoughts as excessive and fanatical. Philip and Tom both react negatively to this change in Maggie. She was never purely selfish, and her new regimen of sacrifice and renunciation, as

Tom puts it, is “ascetic and harsh” (Eliot, 1996, p. 350). Philip also warns her saying: “... you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of your nature” (p. 340). Even Paris remarks, Maggie’s renunciation is not “completely genuine or realistic – hence it does not last” (p. 29). Neil Roberts (1975) argues that “the moral imperative” that governs the novel actually “hampers Maggie’s moral development; asceticism is too strict, and Maggie must abandon her fanatical attitudes in order to flourish properly” (p. 93).

A primary motif in the novel is the complex nature of love which is shown in its passionate, platonic, and filial aspects. At various times, Maggie is torn between different loves: her deep love for her brother, a platonic love for Philip Wakem, and a passionate love for Stephen Guest, Lucy Deane’s undeclared fiancé and the richest, best-looking young bachelor in St. Ogg’s. I find Maggie’s romantic involvement with Stephen Guest to be unconvincing, firstly in terms of the relative sketchiness of the presentation of Stephen himself, particularly, in comparison to his rival Philip Wakem, and, secondly, with respect to the credibility of Maggie’s reaction to his attentions. I agree that Stephen is not given much scope to develop as a complex character in his own right. On the other hand, however this may not be so much a flaw in his characterization as an indication of the nature of the interest he inspires in Maggie. Feuerbach’s own pragmatic definition of love can be seen to evoke a greater passion than is evident in Maggie’s feeling for Philip:

What the old mystics said of God, that he is the highest and yet the commonest being, applies in truth to love, and that not a visionary, imaginary love – no! a real love, a love which has flesh and blood, which vibrates as an almighty force through all living. (p. 42)

When Feuerbach states that “... marriage as the free bond of love – is sacred in itself”, he means that a “religious marriage, which is a true marriage” (p. 222) corresponds to the essence of marriage, that is, of love. Over the years, Maggie’s relationship with Philip develops very much as an intellectual and spiritual connection. But her attraction towards Stephen is clearly sexual – and, as such, instinctive and spontaneous. Therefore, one can argue that Feuerbachian feeling is better manifested in Maggie’s passionate desire for Stephen Guest.

Stephen is most frequently associated with music and the river. These two things epitomize the irresistible force of the intoxication which Maggie increasingly feels in his presence. When she listens to Stephen sing, her soul is captured by an invisible influence, “the inexorable power of sound” (Eliot, 1996, p. 434), and she is swept along as by a wave “too strong for her” (p. 435). Even Feuerbach argues strongly for the power of music:

What would man be without feeling? It is the musical power in man. But what would man be without music? Just as a man has a musical faculty and feels an inward necessity to breathe out his feelings in song; so, by a like necessity, he, in religious sighs and tears, streams forth the nature of feeling as an objective, divine nature. (p. 54)

Stephen is one of the recurring “self-pleasing” characters in Eliot’s fiction. He attempts to persuade Maggie to run away with him, arguing: “What could we care about in the whole world beside, if we belonged to each other? ... We can’t help the pain it will give” (Eliot, 1996, p. 394). This, however, is what holds Maggie back – she cannot willfully pain her cousin and Philip. *The Saturday Review* critic discusses Maggie’s spiritual journey:

When her suffering becomes too intense, she takes refuge in mystical religion. Later on, she seems to accept the doctrine inculcated by one of her loves, that resignation cannot be the highest end of human life, as it is merely negative. She then passes into a stage where

she is absorbed in the fierce moral conflicts awakened by a passion to which she thinks it wrong to yield. (Carroll, 1971, p. 117)

Maggie explains to Stephen that they cannot renounce the duties life made for them before they fell in love. She has outgrown the fanciful notion of self-sacrifice, but can never fail to see or ignore the effect her actions will have on others.

Feuerbach had pointed out that the consciousness of “moral law, of right, of propriety, of truth itself” (p. 131), was intrinsically united with man’s consciousness of another than himself, so that his fellow-man could function as an objective conscience, making his failings a reproach, and guiding him toward the right. As her secret feeling for Stephen Guest becomes more compelling, Maggie begins to look on Philip as Feuerbach’s “objective conscience”. Feuerbach elaborates it further:

Unity in essence is multiplicity in existence. Between me and another human being – and this other is the representative of the species, even though he is only one, for he supplies to me the want of many others, has for me a universal significance, is the deputy of mankind, in whose name he speaks to me, an isolated individual, so that, when united only with me, I have a participated, a human life. (p. 131)

Philip’s appeal is to Maggie’s womanly devotion and not to her egoism. So it creates a “sanctuary” (Eliot, 1996, p. 500) where she can find refuge from the alluring influence of Stephen which she needs to resist.

But Maggie does yield to her passion; with her new passiveness gained from religion, she allows herself to float away with Stephen. When she finally remembers herself, she returns home to St. Ogg’s without Stephen. She was not welcomed with open arms. Public opinion would have judged Maggie more kindly if she had actually married Stephen and come back a rich wife. Dr. Kenn, who becomes her confessor, feels she has been judged too harshly, and reproves his congregation:

The Church ought to represent the feeling of the community, so that every parish should be a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual father. But the ideas of discipline and Christian fraternity are entirely relaxed – they can hardly be said to exist in the public mind ... if I were not supported by the firm faith that the Church must ultimately recover the full force of that constitution which is alone fitted to human needs, I should often lose heart at observing the want of fellowship and sense of mutual responsibility among my own flock. At present everything seems tending towards the relaxation of ties. (p. 435)

Dr. Kenn’s conception of the Church is a humanist one. He substantiates Maggie’s best feelings, whose “heart has given [her] true light on this point” (p. 435). The Church has failed to realize the original Christian vision of a true fellowship in which members exercised mutual responsibility and forgiveness toward each other. The society of St. Ogg’s is condemned for its vicious gossip and inability to forgive. It needs to learn from Bob Jakin, who at one point says: “I shouldn’t like to punish anyone, even if they’d done me wrong; I’ve done wrong myself too often” (p. 430). In other words, the town needs to learn what Eliot reinforced in her religious humanism – that the only way to revitalize Christianity, is to put the focus on human beings, not on God or an afterlife. We should not try to save our own souls, but the souls of others.

Maggie faced one final trial. Heavy rains came. As it beat against her window one midnight, she was reading a letter from Stephen in which he begged her to let him return to her.

As she prays to God for guidance, alternately accepting Stephen's letters of proposal and recoiling against her impulse to do so, the fatal flood rises above her knees. She manages to get into a boat with the resolve to find the Mill and rescue Tom and her mother. Tom, stranded in the attic, is amazed to see her. Maggie and Tom go out together into the current to rescue Lucy and the others, but huge floating masses bear down on them, their boat capsizes, and they are drowned in a close embrace.

Water, for Feuerbach, is the sacrament which symbolically asserts man's dependence on nature; the flood is an act of nature, of natural rhythms and forces, not of an angry, vengeful God. Curiously, Feuerbach states that in water "the scales fall from [man's] eyes: he sees and thinks more clearly", and at the same time "human mental activity is nullified" (p. 226). Both these effects of water operate in the novel. With Stephen, Maggie falls into oblivion as she floats downstream; by contrast, with Tom the scales fall from her eyes as she reflects: "What quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a great calamity, when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs." (Eliot, 1996, p. 539) Here, appropriately, Maggie not only "sees" and thinks more clearly, but she is forced to these reflections by the power of Nature over the merely "artificial". In the death that follows, consciousness is nullified, but only after, by symbolically crying "Maggie", Tom avers the love which dominated in the natural state of childhood. Feuerbach regards water as having not merely physical, but also moral and intellectual effects. Among the virtues of water, he cites purification of body and mind, mental clarity and discipline, a feeling of freedom and, most significantly in relation to this novel, the extinguishing of "the fire of appetite" (p. 52). He says: "The bath is a sort of chemical process, in which our individuality is resolved into the objective life of Nature. The man rising from the water is a new, a regenerate man ... Water is the simplest means of healing for the maladies of the soul as well as of the body" (p. 226). The deaths are purification for both Maggie and Tom. They did not survive the flood, but found reconciliation. Tom, for his part, had redeemed the Mill and honoured the memory of his father. Maggie, on the other hand, through her courage and resolve, became in the end someone like the Virgin, who was seen on the waters during storm and flood, shedding light so that others might be safe.

The Mill on the Floss reminds us of the fragility of the human existence in the world, and of the fact that good and innocent people sometimes suffer indiscriminate harm. The novel is subtle in terms of Eliot's religious humanism – we learn from Maggie's mistake, rather than by a positive example of how people can rescue each other. Eliot writes some of her most scathing criticism about the Church, urging a change from lackadaisical, selfish worship, to a humanist conception of fellow-feeling. Maggie is exemplifying Feuerbach's "suffering of love", for Feuerbach saw the Christian passion as expressing the nature of the heart, and the essence of Christianity, purified from theological dogmas and contradictions, as springing: "... out of the heart, out of the inward impulse to do good, to live and die for man, out of the divine instinct of benevolence which desires to make all happy, and excludes none" (p. 226). Feuerbach not only affirms that to suffer is the highest command of Christianity, but also that redemption is the result of that suffering. Maggie has undergone temptation; she has been judged and surely, in a sense, crucified by the "world's wife" (Eliot, 1996, p. 476) and by her own kin. Yet she held on to the clue of life and in the end was faithful to those whom she loved the best.

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