



The Ethical Dilemma in *The Mill on the Floss*: The Struggle between 'Antigone' and 'Creon'

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ABSTRACT

George Eliot views *Antigone* as a microcosm of social ethics, reflecting the clash between individuals and established rules. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie, a mortal “Antigone,” struggles against the “established laws” embodied by her brother Tom, ultimately sacrificing herself for family interests. While Creon and Antigone represent a choice between human and divine law, Tom and Maggie symbolize tradition versus freedom. Through Maggie, Eliot highlights the triple ethical dilemmas faced by Victorian women. This paper, based on ethical criticism, reveals three key findings: First, Maggie faces a familial ethical dilemma between conforming to traditional female roles and pursuing self-realization. Second, she experiences a social ethical dilemma between maintaining family status and personal emotional choices, causing ethical anxiety. Third, the moral ethical dilemma between traditional morals and romantic pursuit forces Maggie to compromise, leading to her tragic end. Under Victorian moral standards, mortal “Antigones” clash with the “angel in the house” ideal, becoming victims of these triple ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: George Eliot; Ethical criticism; *The Mill on the Floss*; Antigone

Antigone is a classic work by the ancient Greek tragic poet Sophocles, widely regarded as one of the greatest exemplars in the history of drama. In interpreting the protagonist Antigone, Hegel posits that the family ethics represented by Antigone and the civic ethics embodied by Creon are different manifestations of ethical entities. However, due to their respective partialities, a fierce conflict arises between them. This tragic conflict reveals the process of the division and restoration of ethical entities and is an inevitable result of the development of ethical entities amidst contradictions. Ultimately, this conflict needs to be reconciled in some way to restore the unity of the ethical entity. Lacan reinterprets *Antigone* from the perspective of the ethics of psychoanalysis. He argues that Antigone’s act of burying Polyneices essentially represents her unconscious adherence to the ethics of psychoanalysis, that is, acting according to her own desires to fulfill her death drive (Wang, 2019, p.41). However, Lacan directs the ethics of psychoanalysis toward two different paths: the ordinary person and the hero, and clear paradoxes emerge in these two directions. For the hero represented by Antigone, Lacan proposes a different ethical dimension in the tragic context. At this level, the tragedy implies “the dimension expressed by what we call the tragic sense of life” (Lacan, 2006, p.313). Guided by this, the hero unhesitatingly arrives at the intersection of two kinds of death, enduring hardships yet remaining unscathed, ultimately achieving a glory reminiscent of Antigone. For the ordinary person, through the inquiry, “Did you act according to your inner desires?” The ethics of psychoanalysis requires them to obey their desires. This back-and-forth creates a paradox. This paradox demonstrates that the focus of these commentaries is primarily on the

“universality” embodied by the character “Antigone,” which may lead to neglect of the specific plot details and character traits of the text. The considerations behind “Antigone’s” choices are obscured by her “divinity,” and the ethical dilemmas she faces are equally worthy of analysis and attention.

As early as the Victorian era, George Eliot emphasized that moral judgments must take into account the diverse circumstances of individual destinies, avoiding the application of a uniform standard to all. She once pointed out that the tragedy of Antigone stems from “the struggle between natural tendencies and established institutions during the gradual harmonization of a person’s external life and internal needs” (Eliot, 2010, p.264). In her view, Antigone’s tragedy is not merely a personal misfortune but also a microcosm of societal ethical conflicts. When A.S. Byatt interpreted this work, she drew a parallel between it and *Antigone*, suggesting that the passionate and stubborn Maggie could be seen as Antigone, while “custom” represents Creon, whom Antigone defies (Byatt, 1980, p.30). In the view of the author of this paper, Maggie’s brother Tom embodies “Creon,” and the conflict between the siblings represents the eternal struggle between “internal needs” and “external laws.” In *Antigone*, Antigone openly violates the burial to perform funeral rites for her brother, is punished by Creon, imprisoned in a tomb, and ultimately forced to commit suicide. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie’s rebellion against societal expectations, particularly her romantic choices that defy traditional ethnics, leads to her ostracism by the community and family, as well as personal suffering. Although both stories end tragically, Antigone’s ethical choices are consistently active; she knowingly acts against the impossible, bravely choosing death over life (Huang&Zhou, 2022, p.70). In contrast, Maggie’s final choice is more influenced by the complexities of family relationships and the responsibilities they entail. She is an “Antigone” bound by family and traditional societal morals. Under the triple ethical dilemmas of family, society, and personal emotions, her choices appear more complex and multifaceted compared to Antigone’s. Maggie serves as a microcosm of countless Victorian women, and through her ethical choices, we can view the ethical dilemmas faced by women of that era.

David Moldstad, in his research, points out that the conflicts in *The Mill on the Floss* bear a striking resemblance to the plot of *Antigone* (Moldstad, 1970), as the central conflict in both works revolves around the opposition between tradition and higher moral laws. However, despite the presence of this conflict in both works, few scholars have examined the subtle relationship between “established laws” and “internal needs” in *The Mill on the Floss* from the perspective of literary ethics. The complexity of this relationship makes Maggie appear more hesitant when faced with ethical choices. In the theory of literary ethical criticism, ethical choice is an essential human choice—a choice about how to be human, made in accordance

with certain social demands and moral norms (Nie, 2014, p.14). Through her semi-autobiographical novel *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot meticulously depicts the ethical environment of the Victorian era, guiding readers to deeply experience the ethical atmosphere of that time. By delicately portraying the ethical stances held by the characters, she prompts readers to reflect on and gain insight into the ethical factors that profoundly influence the characters' fates and even trigger social transformations. In this novel, the complex moral and ethical dilemmas faced by Maggie become the focal point of discussion. A thorough exploration of the familial, societal, and personal emotional ethical dilemmas Maggie encounters allows us to better understand the subtle conflicts between personal desires, societal expectations, and familial responsibilities. This paper will, from an ethical perspective, delve into the triple ethical dilemmas faced by Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, revealing how these dilemmas, like invisible shackles, bind her and transform this earthly "Antigone" into a martyr under "custom."

1. The Familial Ethical Dilemma of the Earthly "Antigone"

When Lacan discusses Antigone's "accusation" and "lament," he succinctly encapsulates her choice as a "march toward death" (Lacan, 2006, p.248). This characterization risks leading to a dangerous conclusion: that women inherently possess a duty, one that mysteriously guides them toward a certain correct and good ethical will; that their actions are not based on personal feelings or desires but on external principles and norms. However, George Eliot perceives in this conflict the helplessness and struggle of individuals facing powerful societal norms, as well as the importance she places on individual moral responsibility. Familial relationships play a pivotal role in shaping characters' destinies and their moral decisions. Through the story of Maggie and her family, George Eliot reveals the complexity and contradictions of Victorian familial ethics. The central character in the novel is Maggie

Antigone highlights an individual's profound loyalty to family, even when it means defying the laws of the state. In the fields of sociology and anthropology, families are typically categorized into nuclear or extended families based on generational order and kinship. Although the nuclear family consists of only two generations in terms of size—typically a pair of adult spouses and their socially recognized children—it was the widely accepted family model among many middle-class households in Victorian London (Wu, 2003). Ideologically, the middle-class family embodied virtues, stability, and comfort. Moreover, the family is the fundamental unit of society; it operates under patriarchal authority; both spouses uphold the principle of male superiority within the household; the husband holds legal and economic control over the wife, children, and servants; and the entire family depends economically on

the husband's income. Hobsbawm writes in his work: "There, the wise rule of the father, husband, and master governs all. As guardian, guide, and judge, he brings prosperity" (Hobsbawm, 1971. p.25). In the Victorian era, where the family was highly valued and served as the moral foundation of the period, the family in *The Mill on the Floss* simultaneously becomes the breeding ground for the tragedy of a "rebellious" woman. The tragedy in this novel may "lie in the conflicts within the hearts of those young people who yearn for joy but find themselves under the sudden cruelty of fate, trapped in the stifling atmosphere of the family" (Eliot, 2003, p.213). Maggie Tulliver is the central figure of this novel, a bright and independent young woman. From childhood, she has been exceptionally intelligent and intellectually curious, with a deep interest in knowledge and literature. However, the family's expectations for women limit their educational opportunities, which conflicts with Maggie's inner desire for knowledge and personal growth. Maggie Tulliver engages in a fierce struggle between conforming to the standard female role expected by her family and pursuing her inner need for self-realization. This struggle is particularly evident in her interactions with her parents and her brother Tom.

Within the hierarchical structure of age and seniority, in addition to the younger generation's obligation to obey their elders, the principle of "the eldest son as the father figure" is also upheld. During their childhood, Maggie harbored deep admiration and dependence on Tom. As her older brother, Tom not only shouldered family responsibilities but also served as Maggie's protector and guide. They played together around the mill, sharing many joyful moments. This close-knit relationship laid a solid foundation for their growth but also sowed the seeds for future conflicts. The novel mentions an incident where Maggie, due to carelessness, forgot to tend to Tom's rabbits, resulting in their death. This event became the catalyst for the initial rift between the siblings. Tom felt anger and disappointment toward Maggie's actions, believing she had neglected her family duties, while Maggie experienced guilt and pain for failing to meet her brother's expectations. In an effort to win Tom's affection, Maggie resolved to treat everyone well from then on and to obey Tom's words. From that point forward, Maggie continually sought her brother's approval, and this desire for his recognition created an ongoing tension between her inner aspirations and Tom's adherence to "social laws." This incident highlights the significant differences in Tom and Maggie's perspectives on family responsibility. Tom viewed Maggie's actions as a neglect of family duty and a sign of disrespect toward him. He expected Maggie to share his sense of familial obligation, but she fell short of his expectations. Maggie, on the other hand, saw her mistake as an unintentional oversight and did not realize the importance of her actions to Tom. This difference in perception led to misunderstandings and conflicts between them. The incident had a profound

impact on Tom and Maggie's personalities and values. From an ethical standpoint, Tom became more resolute in his belief in family responsibility and male authority, convinced that strict adherence to ethical norms was essential for maintaining family harmony and stability. Maggie, however, began to reflect on her actions and sought independence and freedom, believing that personal emotions and freedom were equally important. This divergence not only shaped their personalities and values but also set the stage for future conflicts.

In comparison to her brother Tom, Maggie exhibited exceptional academic talent from a young age. However, during the Victorian era, the father held absolute authority in the household, while the mother was regarded as the "angel in the house." Boys were sent to expensive schools for education, while girls were taught at home by inexpensive governesses (Wu, 2003). As a result, the family's educational resources were still skewed in favor of Tom, and Maggie did not receive the same level of education as her brother. Maggie's father, Mr. Tulliver, held traditional views regarding his daughter's behavior and future. He expected Maggie to adhere to social norms, focus on practical household duties, and fulfill the typical female role. However, Maggie's innate curiosity for knowledge and her desire for independence clashed with her father's expectations, leading to tension in their father-daughter relationship. Mr. Tulliver adhered to the principle of "boys first" in his children's education. Even though he believed that Maggie "could have matched a lawyer if she had been a boy" (19), he still prioritized Tom's education and paid little attention to Maggie, who had loved reading since childhood. He made decisions about the children's education and future unilaterally, without consulting his wife, merely informing her of his choices. For instance, he insisted on sending Tom to school, hoping that he would receive a good education to secure a livelihood in the future. He instructed Tom to leave school on Lady Day, despite knowing nothing about Reverend Stelling and the high annual tuition fees. Compared to Maggie, Tom was not particularly enthusiastic about learning, but as the heir to the mill, their father wanted Tom to receive a practical education, emphasizing numeracy, observation, and communication skills to avoid legal disputes. This focus on practical skills and social abilities naturally positioned Tom as the family's pillar in the future. In contrast, Maggie's limited educational opportunities and the constraints of her gender role sowed the seeds for future conflicts with Tom as she pursued her freedom and ideals.

Similar to Antigone, Maggie assumes an active and courageous role, challenging the traditional societal expectations of women through her actions. She harbors a profound thirst for knowledge and yearns for her parents to treat her equally, just as they do her brother. However, the intricate dynamics within the family inadvertently constrain her ethical choices. Maggie's inner aspirations drive her to pursue her dreams boldly, yet her parents' adherence

to traditional expectations compels her to conform to established social norms—norms that pertain to family, marriage, and gender roles. Despite the deep emotional bond she shares with her brother, their relationship is marked by an undercurrent of inequality. Tom dominates this relationship, often demanding contributions and sacrifices from Maggie. Within the family structure, the overemphasis on predefined female roles clashes with Maggie's pursuit of freedom and equality, subtly constructing a framework that influences her future ethical decisions. Through the portrayal of Maggie's relationship with her family, George Eliot does not unilaterally emphasize male-centric values of justice; in her view, the caring nature of women should also be valued. Men should learn to care on the basis of justice, while women should value justice within their caring roles, thereby achieving gender harmony in the process of moral development.

2. The Social Ethical Dilemma of the Earthly “Antigone”

Through the character of Maggie, George Eliot unveils the ethical dilemmas of Victorian England, while also exploring the conflict between familial responsibilities and personal aspirations, as well as the impact of societal changes on individual destinies. Family life and ethical interactions centered around blood ties reinforce a sense of self-acceptance, belonging, and shared values among community members based on emotional kinship. This fosters a will to protect and defend the family unit and actively perpetuate the family lineage (Long&Jia, 2019). The reputation and responsibilities of the family hold extraordinary significance for each of its members. In her defense of familial dignity and honor, Antigone makes a noble moral choice, yet pays a heavy price for it, as she bravely defies authority and challenges the societal expectations of women at the time. The sudden economic and moral crisis within the Tulliver family plunges them into a severe social status predicament. In this context, the dual pressures of familial duty and personal desires inevitably force family members to prioritize family honor over individual pursuits, dragging Maggie into a social ethical dilemma, as if bound by a metaphorical shackle. The Tulliver family's social status crisis is closely tied to their financial troubles and legal disputes. Factors such as the family's bankruptcy, litigation issues, and economic hardships not only exacerbate internal tensions but also trigger profound social ethical dilemmas. Tom and Maggie, faced with these dilemmas, develop irreconcilable conflicts due to differences in personality, values, and societal expectations. As Maggie confesses, she is willing to do anything and endure everything for her father (Eliot, 2003, p.222). The moral code of upholding family honor within the household undoubtedly challenges familial relationships and deepens Maggie's moral anxiety.

Set against the backdrop of the mid-19th century, *The Mill on the Floss* portrays a time when a new economic system was actively penetrating and challenging the old one. In this era of transformation, Victorians such as Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg began to gradually regard securities as equivalent to currency (Spillman, 2017). The mill, as the sole property of the Tulliver family, held particular significance. However, “it is Mr. Tulliver’s financial difficulties and subsequent bankruptcy that foreshadow the suffering of the next generation” (Blake, 2005). As the younger generation of the family, Maggie and Tom find themselves both bewildered and helpless in the face of societal changes, yet they strive to carve out their own paths. The sudden economic and moral crises, along with external pressures, force each member of the Tulliver family to prioritize family honor above all else, relegating the desire for a united and stable family environment, safety, and happiness to secondary importance. For Maggie, who yearns for freedom and love, this undoubtedly creates profound ethical anxiety. Simultaneously, the Tulliver family’s financial struggles exacerbate the tension between Tom and Maggie. As the one burdened with the responsibility of managing family affairs, Tom expects Maggie to conform to societal norms in order to alleviate their predicament.

From the early 19th century onward, the “feminine ideal” and the “separate spheres” were undoubtedly two of the most central concepts in the domestic life of the Victorian middle class. Women played a crucial role in the private sphere of the family, and in 19th-century Britain, “the cult of the home” could even be equated with “the cult of the woman.” Alongside specific domestic rules and expectations, the “domestic ideal” defined women’s roles and duties within the household (Huang&Zhou, 2022). Furthermore, Rachel Ablow emphasizes that the “cult of true womanhood” was closely tied to the “cult of domesticity,” asserting that women should be pious, pure, submissive, and home-centered. Women were expected to embody feminine virtues, which, though not defined by a single standard, typically manifested as gentleness, obedience, selflessness, and a willingness to sacrifice (Ablow, 2007). As a British writer and social reformer, John Ruskin also agreed that a wife need not work outside the home. Her role was that of a homemaker, responsible for ensuring the family’s happiness, preparing meals, doing the laundry, maintaining household cleanliness, and educating the children (Ruskin, 2012). Women were largely confined to the private sphere of the home, while men dominated the political, economic, commercial, and public social spheres, providing financial support for the family and owning all property. Men held economic power both within the household and in other family-related domains, solidifying the entrenched ethical notion of male superiority over women in Victorian families.

The relationship between Maggie and her brother Tom is characterized more by his assertion of dominant masculinity than by warm sibling affection (Kiesel, 2014). Due to the cultural constructs of a patriarchal society and the differing thinking patterns of men and women, when faced with ethical dilemmas in moral development, men tend to follow a path of justice, while women lean toward a path of care. In Tom's value system, familial responsibility and honor far outweigh the bond between siblings. He firmly believes that Maggie must adhere to the established societal norms for women, as only then can she shoulder the responsibilities bestowed upon her by the family. Although Maggie harbors deep affection for her brother, their understanding of duty and social norms diverges significantly, which in turn affects their relationship. Tom often perceives Maggie's actions as rebellious and irresponsible, undoubtedly exacerbating the conflict between familial obligations and Maggie's personal aspirations. Whenever Tom finds Maggie disagreeing with him, he becomes even more convinced that "girls can't do anything" (Eliot, 2003, p.92). As a result, when the family faces financial difficulties, Tom assumes the role of protector, taking on the burden of supporting the family, which aligns with societal expectations of men as the pillars of the household. Tom tells Maggie, "Don't talk about working," choosing to bear all the pressure alone. However, Tom's protective instincts do not become Maggie's salvation; instead, they transform into an invisible shackle. When Tom attempts to restrain and guide Maggie, his protective desires clash fiercely with Maggie's independent spirit and her aspirations for the future. This divergence not only fails to bring the siblings closer but, in some ways, deepens the rift between them.

Beyond property disputes and legal issues, the Tulliver family is also mired in a moral crisis. In this crisis, every choice made by family members is exposed to societal scrutiny and potential ostracism. Maggie's emotional entanglements with Philip and Stephen stir up a moral storm within the family, undoubtedly intensifying Maggie's ethical anxiety. Maggie's deep friendship with Philip Wakem, the son of the family's long-standing enemy, lawyer Wakem, arouses societal suspicion and criticism. This relationship challenges prevailing social moral norms and public judgment. For Maggie, this friendship is like an unsolvable moral knot, as she struggles to find a balance between personal emotions and familial obligations. On the other hand, Stephen Guest's ardent pursuit of Maggie also triggers a new moral test. Societal expectations regarding loyalty, engagement, and marriage become the core of the moral judgment surrounding the love triangle involving Maggie, Philip, and Stephen. The societal moral judgments and expectations surrounding romantic relationships clash irreconcilably with Maggie's inner longing for genuine love and emotional connection. As the moral crisis escalates, the family is forced to confront the consequences of societal norms, issues of loyalty, and the potential repercussions of defying established moral codes, striving to avoid becoming

the subject of public gossip. Maggie's brother Tom expresses strong disapproval of her personal emotional choices, and her mother, Mrs. Tulliver, is deeply concerned that her daughter's romantic decisions may cause irreparable damage to the family's reputation. The moral pressures from both family and community undoubtedly exacerbate the emotional and ethical crises Maggie faces.

The Victorian era was characterized by rigid class hierarchies and hypocritical, snobbish interpersonal relationships. The upper and middle classes went to great lengths to maintain their social status, even if they fell into financial misfortune, falsely preserving their dignity (Jonathan, 2019). The economic difficulties faced by the Tulliver family, along with the moral crisis triggered by Maggie's relationships, led to their isolation from other residents of the town, creating a distinctly negative perception within the community. The Dodsons, relatives of the Tullivers, distanced themselves from the family out of fear that the Tullivers' financial troubles might affect their own social standing. This isolation caused even greater panic among the Tulliver family members. When confronted with moral dilemmas, the loyalty between family members was put to the test. For Antigone, a sense of duty to her family was the driving force behind her courageous resistance, but for Maggie, this same sense of duty became a constraint and a source of pressure when her family faced economic and moral crises. Tom's sense of responsibility and his adherence to social norms often clashed with Maggie's desire to choose her relationships according to her own wishes. The moral standards established within the family, which prioritized family honor, undoubtedly posed challenges to familial relationships and added to Maggie's moral anxiety. Maggie's internal need for autonomy and emotional fulfillment clashed with the external demands of family duty and societal expectations. The outcomes of moral choices significantly impacted family relationships and individual happiness.

3. The Ethical Dilemma of Personal Emotions of the Earthly

“Antigone”

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot, through the emotional world of Maggie—a mortal “Antigone”—similarly reveals the struggles and choices individuals face between love, family, and social responsibilities. Antigone presents an ethical dilemma concerning human decision-making. In the play, the act of burying her deceased brother carries dual significance on an ethical level: on one hand, it is a gesture of respect and mourning for a loved one, undoubtedly reflecting profound moral sentiment; on the other hand, because it violates the laws of the city-state, this act is deemed immoral. The ethical paradox in the play is embodied in the ritual of burial. The ethical values inherited from clan society emphasize the importance of familial

bonds and kinship, regarding the burial of a family member as an inescapable duty. Simultaneously, the legal authority of the city-state demands that citizens strictly adhere to the law, and any violation will be punished. Both perspectives possess their own rationality and legitimacy within their respective domains, making Antigone's choice seem morally justified and correct, regardless of which side she chooses. The ethical conflict in Antigone lies in the opposition between personal emotions and state law, while in *The Mill on the Floss*, the ethical conflict manifests in the clash between personal emotions, family responsibilities, and social norms. Both works reveal the depth and complexity of ethical conflicts, highlighting the helplessness and struggles humans face when confronted with moral dilemmas. In *The Mill on the Floss*, this ethical paradox emerges in the form of romantic relationships. The challenge Maggie faces is how to balance principled moral behavior with the immediate consequences such actions may bring (Fessenbecker, 2018). The predetermined expectations of women's roles within the family invisibly set a moral benchmark for Maggie's behavior. The dual crisis of economic and moral challenges within the family further exacerbates her moral anxiety, making her personal moral dilemmas even more intricate. Maggie's two romantic relationships profoundly reflect her moral and emotional choices in her personal life. In her efforts to balance family duties, social norms, and the pursuit of personal happiness, she encounters significant moral conflicts, ultimately leading to a tragic conclusion.

The profound friendship between Maggie and Philip Wakem was met with vehement opposition from both society and their respective families due to the legal disputes between the two households. Maggie's inner yearning for knowledge and understanding sharply conflicted with the external criticism and disapproval of her relationship with Philip. This conflict stemmed from her difficult choice between personal desires and familial responsibilities. Philip and Maggie shared a common pursuit of literature and intellectual exploration, transcending societal expectations and prejudices to forge a deep bond based on mutual knowledge and interests. Philip could almost be considered a male counterpart to Maggie (Guth, 1983), and their intellectual companionship provided Maggie with a sense of solace, creating a space where they could freely explore their interests without being constrained by societal norms. However, as their friendship gradually evolved into love, it further incited societal discontent and moral condemnation. As they grew older, Philip developed deep feelings for Maggie. This unrequited love complicated their relationship even more. Philip's emotions for Maggie became a source of inner turmoil for him, adding further complexity to their emotional exchanges. Traditional moral standards, familial expectations, and societal constraints imposed significant limitations on Maggie's choices. Her inner desire for emotional connection and personal fulfillment clashed with society's rigid norms regarding

appropriate romantic relationships. This tension between personal desires and societal expectations lies at the heart of Maggie's moral dilemma.

Meanwhile, Maggie's brother Tom remained steadfast in adhering to his family's teachings. Despite Philip being the only companion in Mr. Stelling's class and showing great kindness to Tom when he injured his foot, Tom never wavered in his commitment to his father's warnings. Mr. Tulliver had cautioned Tom not to get too close to Philip, as Philip had inherited his father's nature, much like a gray colt that might occasionally kick like a black stallion. Moreover, Tom resolved to avoid speaking to or befriending Philip after graduating from high school. He was constantly reminded by his father's words that Philip was the son of an "evil" man. Following his father's request, Tom diligently recorded the Wakem family's dreadful "memories" and curses in the Bible. Although this was an unsavory act, he treated it as a guiding principle, never forgiving the Wakem family and refusing to allow his sister Maggie to meet with Philip. When Tom discovered Maggie's involvement with Philip, he promptly intervened, demanding that Maggie place her hand on their father's Bible and make a solemn vow. He also spoke harshly and sternly about Philip in front of Maggie, fulfilling his duties as both a son and a brother.

The flood, as a natural disaster prevalent in human myths and cultures, is often imbued with symbolic significance. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the flood not only serves as the direct cause of the Tulliver family's tragedy but also functions as a profound metaphor for the characters' fates, moral dilemmas, and societal transformations. The flood symbolizes death and rebirth, embodying both a destructive force and a purifying agent that washes away sin, dissolves misunderstandings, and eradicates hatred. While it destroys lives, the flood also offers an opportunity for individuals to reexamine themselves and seek renewal. Within this catastrophic flood, we witness the ultimate submission of a woman whose thoughts transcended her era: although Maggie harbored affection for Philip, she consistently restrained her emotions, reminding herself not to abandon the absolute principle of self-restraint, for doing so would plunge her into unrestrained desire. Thus, Maggie steadfastly avoided hurting Philip's feelings and ultimately parted ways with him. Faced with a partner who attracted her, Maggie chose to reject him to spare Lucy from harm. Despite her love for Stephen, Maggie was convinced that she should not pursue her own happiness at the expense of others. During the "elopement," Maggie maintained her conscience and rationality, continually battling the moral evil within herself: "I cannot and should not seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural, but so are pity, loyalty, and memory" (Eliot, 2003, p.610). Maggie also firmly believed that people are bound together by trust and love. She decided to return alone to St. Ogg's and confess everything, trusting that others would believe

her and that Lucy would forgive her. Although reality fell far short of Maggie's expectations, and Dr. Kenn advised her to leave town temporarily, Maggie remained convinced that everyone would eventually recognize their mistakes. At this stage, Maggie accepted her obligations to society and others, embracing the moral and ethical values of the broader community. She completed her transformation from a self-centered individual driven by instinctual desires to one who assumed familial responsibilities, ultimately accepting the moral and ethical values of society as a whole. Maggie gradually evolved into a gentle, selfless, and self-sacrificing individual. She chose familial duty over personal happiness to fulfill her obligations to her family. The earthly "Antigone" was ultimately brought down from her pedestal, yielding to the constraints of "Creon."

Conclusion

In the play *Antigone*, she defies Creon's decree and resolutely takes control of Polynices' burial rites. Despite the opposition of the legal authority of the city-state, which issues a prohibition, Antigone does not retreat. However, in the face of two major decisions regarding love, Maggie chooses to prioritize family interests and social responsibilities over love and personal pursuit, relinquishing her own emotional fulfillment and desires. The tragic drowning of Tom and Maggie ultimately epitomizes the arduous and painful reconciliation between human "inner needs" and "established laws," bringing the grand narrative of classical tragedy from the halls of kings and deities into the real world of ordinary people. Echoing Antigone, Maggie also demonstrates the resilience and courage of women. While adhering to familial loyalty, she subtly challenges societal stereotypes of women. Yet, even an "Antigone"-like Maggie, with all her perseverance, struggles to bear the immense pressure imposed by the ethical environment. In the face of ethical choices, she is compelled to make sacrifices and compromises. Through her nuanced portrayal of Maggie's ethical dilemmas, George Eliot reawakens our understanding of the plight of women in the 19th century. In reality, Eliot, in her essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, criticizes the unoriginal works of female novelists and calls on the government to provide women with diverse employment opportunities, enabling them to find more suitable professions (Eliot, 2003, p.323). She encourages women to discover their life's value through self-education and labor, freeing themselves from familial constraints and patriarchal control to attain spiritual redemption. Through her novels, Eliot reflects on the multifaceted challenges women faced during an era of clashing old and new ideologies, revealing the numerous obstacles 19th-century women encountered in their pursuit of self-realization and true love.

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