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**A World for Herself—
An Identification of the
Narrative Voice In *The Mill
On The Floss***

No reader of *The Mill on the Floss* can remain long unaware of certain anomalies both implicit and explicit in the text. These include, primarily, the unusual introductory and concluding chapters, which sandwich—so to speak—the cryptic narrative voice. These three apparent inconsistencies, presenting at first glance what appears to be a lack of unity, might easily be explained and tied together if we take the perhaps unusual step of identifying the narrator as the protagonist.

For simplicity's sake, we might first examine the opening chapter. The primary point of interest is the use of the present tense combined with first person narration. Since the remainder of the story is told in the past tense, this immediately establishes a *reflective* quality. Indeed, the narrator expresses this: "I remember the large dripping willows . . . I remember the stone bridge." (53) Certainly, there can be little doubt that the unfolding story is at least a *partly* remembered story. The qualifying "partly" is necessitated by the force of *dreaming* which is also established:

"I have been . . . dreaming that I was standing on the
bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill as it looked one February
afternoon many years ago." (55)

Juxtaposed in here, both the histrionics of "dreaming" as well as the

history of “as it looked.” If this fails to establish a link between the character of the narrator and Maggie, it does, at least, describe the character, the duality, of the history, But this combination of remembering and remaking is soon brought more clearly to light, and does actually begin to tie narrator and character together:

They had entered the thorny wilderness [adulthood], and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them. (270)

We might compare this to the childhood actually portrayed:

Well! there was no hope for it: he was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the holly or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be.

Maggie’s was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium. (101-102)

It is understandable that a narrator might romanticise *her own* childhood, but less likely someone else’s. Naturally enough then, what we see is Maggie as narrator “refashioning” her world just as Maggie the character does.

Also in this vein is the narrator’s oscillating description of Maggie’s appearance. Firstly she is, “A girl of no startling appearance.” (320) And yet:

“The full lustrous face with the bright black coronet, looked down like that of a divinity.” (425-426)

The above are only two of many instances exhibiting this outright vacillation. The narrator, intelligent and observant, cannot surely be so

unsure of her principal player's looks. Of *herself* though, this seems perfectly understandable.

And so, the sudden supplanting of the individual narrator of limited personal knowledge by an omniscient one in chapter 2, no longer seems *quite* so problematical. Maggie, as a child, is the consummate day-dreamer; Maggie, as narrator, the consummate creator. And yet this and other fictional elements of *The Mill on the Floss* do not entirely explain the abrupt change of voice and position. The need for this *distance*, assumed by the narrator, is not fully revealed until the conclusion, though its appropriateness gradually becomes evident as we witness it mirrored in the gulf which separates Maggie from her brother. The self-conceived narrative separation, loaded as it is with deception, is not uniformly maintained. On occasion, the same flesh and blood narrator of the first chapter reveals herself as the omniscient narrator of the rest:

But older even than this old Hall is perhaps the bit of wall now built into the belfry of the parish church and said to be a remnant of the original chapel dedicated to St Ogg, the patron saint of this ancient town, of whose history I possess several manuscript versions. (182)

Here then the *authenticity* of not only the setting is underlined, but also of the narrator as an actual person related to that setting, whose impossible ability to see and know all, is a deliberate red herring, designed principally to grant creative licence, and in doing so allow absolute freedom.

As well as establishing the weaving together of fact and fancy, the first chapter also presents a narrator fascinated by the river Floss, which seems itself to possess the power to promote fantasy, as well as a feeling of serenity:

The rush of the water and the booming of the mill bring a dreamy deafness which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like great curtains of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond. (54)

Here then we find another link, this one tying the introduction to the conclusion: The river is shown here as a simile separating the narrator from the world; in the conclusion, we effectively see a transposition where the river serves as a metaphor, separating Maggie from her past—though it is an implied and ironic separation, suggested by the romantic and unreal *joining* of Maggie and her brother—and bringing with that separation a similar serenity.

Maggie's penchant for flights of fancy is central to understanding the unity of *The Mill on the Floss*.

"If I send her up-stairs to fetch anything she forgets what she's gone for." (60)

Her Imagination is not only a tool with which she escapes certain resolute realities—in particular the subjugation effected by the chains of clanship, as well as the heartless male chauvinism of her brother—to varying degrees of success, but also is emblematic of the division separating the siblings, for it shows Maggie connected to the male side of the family, the Tullivers: romantic and impractical, warm hearted, and Tom, who takes after, with perfect irony, the female side, the Dodsons: utilitarian and pragmatic, advocates of severe punishment. Indeed, early on Maggie states her bias, when she complains: "I don't want to do anything for my aunt Glegg, I don't like her." (61) This division of sexes in the two branches of the family, the inherent limitations of behaviour regulated by the "world beyond" and supported by the clanship—personified in the form of aunt

Glegg—superimposed on the division of dissimilar personalities, provides the basis for the rift between Maggie and Tom; a rift which begins in childhood when Tom displays a preference for Lucy, who is more able and willing—then and in later life—to fit the narrow confines of that male conception of what a female should be. The importance of fantasy and this sibling separation is emphasised early:

O Luke, Tom told me to be sure and remember the rabbits every day—but how could I, when they did not come into my head, you know? (82)

Here then we see the extent of Maggie's detachment from the world, during her daydreaming. If the uncontrolled imagination of Maggie as character here results in the death of two rabbits, the deliberate disposition of imagination by Maggie as narrator later brings about two more fundamental deaths. More telling than Tom's resultant anger, in this former episode, is his scorn when she offers to buy him new rabbits:

What for? . . . I don't want *your* money, you silly thing. I've got a great deal more money than you, because I'm a boy. (87)

Besides the condescension of "silly thing," and the chauvinism of "I'm a boy," there is the connotative sense that the order of things is established so firmly as to be clearly understood by even so young a boy. The ramifications of Tom's words are made clear by the impartial Mrs. Moss: ". . . the rich mostly get things their way." (228) Consequently, as Tom brings back the family fortune, as he becomes "the rich," he increasingly insists upon having his way.

. . . You should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. (319)

I shall always take care of you. But you must mind what
I say. (319)

With his determination to be the determiner ever more resolute, the family ties (including sibling sympathies) which demand fulfilment of duty—meaning, to Maggie, mindless compliance with male authority—are pulled ever more taut by her natural aversion to such subjugation.

Though both Maggie as narrator and Maggie as character make use of fantasy, it should, by now, be apparent that they are not entirely bent upon the same ends. By fictionalising her history, the narrator effects a catharsis which is not truly evident until the final line. Alternately, the protagonist uses, particularly in the early chapters, fantasy in a less mature manner: primarily as a means of escape. It is interesting to note, however, the manner in which her mental activities do evolve from simple vicarious living to a more philosophical adventure. In the early episodes, Maggie simply follows her uncontrolled fantasies wherever they might lead, losing all connection with the real world and its real rabbits. Next, we see Maggie more and more inclined towards literature—living in a rather more structured and perhaps less mesmerisingly vicarious world. Her involvement in books runs parallel to her involvement with Philip. Forced by Tom to renounce Philip, she is forced—though more willingly—by another male, Thomas à Kempis, to renounce desire. Maggie's complete subjugation by the philosophies of Thomas à Kempis seems at first unlikely, but on closer inspection turns out to be almost inevitable. What we find is Maggie making use of this more philosophical literature not as a tool to deal *with* life but, as with her previous dreaming, as a means of escape *from* life. It is interesting that during this period, Maggie, under this external influence, become more passive than at any other point.

. . . It was amazing that this once “contrairy: child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will.(387) Certainly, the influence is not simply of à Kempis, but there is the suggestion, between the lines, that this occupation of Maggie’s self will is also an inherent quality of religion.

Also of importance is the question of authorship which arose around à Kempis’ *magnum opus*, for there is the well-known scholastic claim that no man of such lowly birth—à Kempis was the son of a blacksmith—could be responsible for so profound a work. Indeed, à Kempis made deliberate efforts to maintain an authorial anonymity. Maggie, the character, in her infatuation with Thomas à Kempis, reveals a certain closeness, an affinity, that she feels not only with the author but with his chosen life style. Maggie, the narrator, reveals a similar affinity with his methods. Whether Thomas à Kempis’ influence upon Maggie is long lived or not is of little importance. What we see, above all else, in the respect she gives him, is another indication of her *apparent* assessment that Wisdom lies in the male domain:

If she had been taught “real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,” she thought she should have held the secrets of life; if she had only books that she might learn for herself what wise men knew. (379)

Later, Maggie refers to “masculine wisdom” (380) as knowledge which makes men contented and glad to live.

We have already noted not only the anonymous nature of the narrator, but also, briefly, a certain effort at deception, as if anonymity were not quite enough. The red herring most often served up in an effort to disguise the identity of the narrator is the ambiguity of gender. More often than

not, we witness what we might call female sensibilities, female interests and observations which would not be entirely characteristic of a male. In these we might include references to female fashion and hair style. At the same time, there are a number of instances where the narrator clearly attempts to imply that she is male:

Every one of those keen moments has left its trace and lives in us still, but such traces have bent themselves irrecoverably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood. (122)

Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm?—the unspeakable suggestion of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow and all the varied gently lessening curves . . . (561)

It would perhaps be erroneous to insist, and was earlier qualified by “apparent,” that the narrator truly believes wisdom to lie in the male domain—after all, Thomas à Kempis' philosophy was finally left aside—though she certainly indicates, with the inclusion of quotation marks in “real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,” and with her efforts to disguise her gender, that the *general* belief is such. The maleness of Maggie's disguise in the role of narrator can, in this light, be seen as an effort to provide the work with more authority than would be granted the creation of a woman.

Finally, as Maggie gradually leaves behind her short lived religious experiment, the force which caused her renunciation of fantasy, of desiring things to be other than they are, disappears. Although Maggie is soon too busy in actual life, particularly with Stephen Guest, to have need for vicarious experience, it is clear that her attempted rejection of fantasy has likewise lost its force. It is family ties and clanship, not religion or

philosophy, which force Maggie to make another and more permanent renunciation: that of Stephen Guest.

We need not dwell on the Stephen Guest episode. It is certainly a climactic period for Maggie, but its importance is primarily in two areas. Firstly, Maggie's involvement with Stephen leads to a reversal of gender roles:

Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the low pale face that was full of pleading timid love—like a woman's. (438)

The significance here lies in the proximity of Maggie the character to her goal of self determination, and closer therefore to the implicit character of Maggie the narrator.

Secondly, the Philip episode is used to expose the strength of clanship ties which are based upon duty and are given particular strength by Maggie's own compassion.

. . . she was disobeying her father's strongest feelings and her brother's express command. (442)

The quotation, of course, is Tom's impression; still, it is nonetheless a true portrayal of Maggie's state at this advanced stage. It does not demonstrate a breaking of the family ties and escape from the bondage of her duty, for it is an assessment that corresponds to Maggie's own, and is followed by her renouncing Philip. In this way, we see that Maggie is Maggie's own worst enemy, unable to achieve autonomy due to her compassion for Lucy and Tom and the memory of her father. Breaking these attachments, in a sense, results in the death of Maggie as she was, and Tom as he insisted on being.

We have now reached the conclusion. It might first be appropriate to

question the initial statement that there is something anomalistic about its nature. There can be little doubt that the flood is surprising; and yet we might wonder why this is so, since there has been a deluge of clues to its likely arrival throughout the story.

There's a story as when the mill changes hands, the
river's angry—I've heard my father say it many times. (352)

The first problem which sits uneasily is the *visitation* quality of the catastrophe, as if—suggested also in the above quotation—it was the will as well as an act of God. We have already seen Maggie's religious experience lead to a diminishment of her worth, and so, at least thematically, the flood in this respect seems entirely inappropriate. There is also the problematical selectivity of the flood, which chooses to wash away the lives only of Maggie and Tom. As well as this we have the too perfect image of the siblings found locked in an endless embrace. As if all this was not enough, we have the impossible inscription on the tomb stone: "In there death they were not divided." (657) It can hardly be disputed that only the narrator and reader are in possession of sufficient knowledge regarding the importance and extent of their separation to write this epitaph.

Without doubt, the above elements, combined, do equal a certain irregularity, though this is entirely nullified when we acknowledge Maggie as being the narrator of her own story. Certainly, this chimerical conclusion is laden with the imaginative qualities of Maggie the character, and provides an explanation of the implicit autonomy of Maggie the narrator.

Maggie's striving for self determination is shown to be finally successful in her self determined conclusion.

The final proof though must come from the narrator herself. In one unguarded moment, masked thinly in cryptic phrase, she acknowledges Maggie as being herself:

A girl of no startling appearance . . . may still hold forces within her as the living plant seed does, which will make a world for themselves, often in a shattering, violent manner.

(320)

By no means can this apply to only Maggie, the character. She makes no world for herself, unless that world is in heaven—though this claim seems tenuous at best. How perfectly this describes Maggie the narrator though. There is undoubted violence in the metaphorical flood and fantastic deaths. There is most definitely a shattering of reality. If Maggie cannot establish contact with Tom in the real world—and this she certainly cannot do without compromising her right to autonomy—she will do so in the unreal, and, at the same time, bury the ties which hold them together and thus free herself entirely, providing the possibility, like the plant seed, to make a world for herself.

Works Cited

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