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DIFFERENCE AS TRAGEDY IN *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS* BY GEORGE ELIOT

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The following text aims to discuss George Eliot's analysis of human relationships and her mindfulness of the pernicious effect caused by paradigms that condemn differences as mere weaknesses. Through "pragmatization of the imaginary" (Iser) in Eliot's novel, as well as with some help from representatives of the natural sciences, we may be able to gain a closer understanding of how people's stages of development and biological traits are often translated into tragic "prisons" of sociality.

Key words: childhood, womanhood, imagination, deviation, tragedy

The Mill on The Floss is a fictional story. But can a fictional story be relied upon as a treatise of human relationships? The answer is yes. To support the positive answer, we shall describe the theory of the German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). In his work *The Fictive and The Imaginary* (1993), he posits that the boundaries between fictional and nonfiction texts are fluid. We cannot tell fiction from nonfiction because we cannot be sure whether the nonfiction text a fully truthful one and consists only of proven facts or whether the nonfiction texts are entirely and completely without reality and facts (cf. Iser 1993: 1). "The real" is the material from which the imaginary is produced, but before making a new world out of the existing one we have to apply acts of fictionalizing. The three main acts of fictionalizing are selection, combination, and self-disclosure (cf. Iser 1993: 4-5). The most crucial moment in Iser's theory is that an imaginary world could be turned into a source for gaining a real experience and thus "fiction finds itself in a context of practical usage" (Iser 1993: 111).

George Eliot is one of the authors who may be said to facilitate such "pragmatization of the imaginary" (Iser 1993: 20) through her reflective

narrative voice. The adopted third-person narration, as Lightman argues, turns the writers into scientific observers who record and analyse the behaviour and the social interactions of their characters (cf. Lightman 2010: 26). Eliot is fond of scientific thought, but she also sees its deficiencies. If we think only scientifically, mathematically, or biologically and see people as mere bundles of good and bad genes and proportions we will become victims of formalizations. Through the “scientific” act of formalization, she envisages the treacherous tendency of people who are not perfect or even people who are just “ordinary” to be pushed into the margins of life. That is why she regularly sheds light on the tragedies of ordinary people and on the often overlooked beauty of their day-to-day existence which is heroic in its own artless way. These are people who make mistakes and who are our “fellow-mortals” (Eliot 1994: 230), who are sometimes “ugly, stupid, inconsistent” (ibid.) and who we should learn to “tolerate, pity, and love” (ibid.) Her narrative voice anticipates the operations described by Iser. She reveals the fictionality of her world and the operations which she uses to build it: “I might **select** the most unexceptional type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions” (Eliot 1994: 129). Yet she does not want to create an illusory and perfect world crammed with admirable opinions. Rather, she *discloses* to us that she strives to achieve “a faithful account of men and things” (ibid.), recognizing the epistemological boundaries of her own experience as a human being and conscious that her knowledge might be erroneous in some cases. Eliot’s acts of focusing attention on self-disclosure and of making the reader aware that fiction is fiction resemble the scientific methods of making hypotheses about the real world, experimenting with hypothetical situations, and drawing conclusions[1]. That is why Eliot’s *The Mill on The Floss* (1860) could provide us with a semantic “laboratory” for checking our hypotheses that being a child or being a woman could result in tragedy. The universal problem of individual vs society shall be examined through two concrete examples of the main characters from the novel and the interactions between them: Tom and Maggie’s childhood, and Maggie’s difference as being a woman manifested in choice and the imagination.

[1] Such methods are especially celebrated by pragmatists like John Dewey and Charles Peirce.

Childhood as difference

For a long time, children were not regarded as human beings but as "undeveloped" human beings. Their identities were identities of deficiency, and the concept of childhood that we know today did not exist. When the phenomenon of childhood was finally recognized, the world became separated into two – "the world of children and the world of adults" (cf. Ariès 1962: 284). An example of this division is the boarding school described by Foucault as "the most perfect, if not the most frequent, educational regime" (Foucault 1979: 141). The development of the boarding-school system demonstrates that childhood was regarded as different from the other stages of development. Childhood was "shut off" in a "world apart" (cf. Ariès 1962: 284). This disciplinary institution[2] separated children from society to "mould" them "on the pattern of an ideal human type" (cf. Ariès 1962: 284-285). George Eliot's take on the topic of childhood is rather different and tends to disenchant this naively idealized perspective of discipline. Seeing all sorts of ideals as fit only for a "world of extremes", she describes childhood positively as a period when connections are possible, and they do not depend on complex social codes. Making links with another human being, reconciliation, and love are easier when one is still in the earliest stages of life. The tragedy of childhood is losing it and realising that we shall never enter its "golden gates" again (Eliot 1994: 537).

The pure sociality which comes naturally in childhood is hindered by the rigid social order which comes afterward. When Maggie and Tom are still children and Tom is angry with Maggie because she lets his rabbits die, their reconciliation is not difficult. They spend some time separated from each other. Maggie is sobbing in her hiding place – the attic. Then she experiences an emotional battle within. Her pride and her "need of being

[2] A most eloquent example of childhood as deviation from normality is described by Foucault. He notes that the prison, the hospital, the factory, and the school share the same structural logic of bringing the deviation back to normality through correct training. They are alike in matters of architectural structure (Bentham's Panopticon architectural composition) (cf. Foucault 1979: 200, 203, 204), and they all use the following means of correct training: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination (cf. Foucault 1979: 170). The panopticon structure of observation proves to be so effective that "All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker, or a schoolboy" (Foucault 1979: 200). We can see that according to the idealized disciplinary perspective being a child was by no means different from being a madman or a criminal.

loved" (Eliot 1994: 419) collide. Her love towards Tom is stronger and she readily forgets his cruelty. Consequently, little Maggie leaves her hiding place. At the same time, she hears Tom's footsteps because he is coming to fetch her. And it is not before long that they become tender to each other resembling "two friendly ponies" (Eliot 1994: 420). After this episode, Eliot reflects on the *development* of society, adding slightly bitter and ironical overtones:

> We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarreled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way … we conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. (Eliot 1994: 420)

The irony here is hinted at with an impressive subtlety. The fact that the adults are somehow *cured* of being impulsive children turns them into admired members of society, but this kind of *union*, paradoxically, makes them strangers to each other. For Eliot civilization means alienation and hypocrisy. Identifying oneself with the spontaneity of behavior typical for the "lower" animals, as described by the author, seems preferable to belonging to a "highly civilized society", yet a society that is savage at heart. This could be interpreted as a mode of social criticism very Romantic in its roots. Like in *Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789), Eliot makes childhood a heavenly place which is corrupted by the "hell" of maturation, of gaining experience, of becoming an adult or simply being among adults. For instance, in *The Chimney Sweeper* we have the childhood nullified and blackened first by the death of the mother and then by the act of the father selling his child to be a chimney sweeper. The very fact that childhood could be bought and sold turns the world of adulthood into a living hell from which the only escape is dreams of angels and early death.

In *The Mill on the Floss* being a child does not mean not being an adult. It is the other way around – being an adult means not being a child. The negative identity is prescribed to the adult. Adamson observes that the moment of Tom and Maggie's rabbit tragedy, followed by sharing a cake and an emotional reunion, is "a foreshadowing of the end of the novel when Maggie comes to Tom's rescue" (Adamson 2003: 319). It shows that alienation could be easily plucked when the soil of social demands is not hardened by years of socialization. Forgiveness comes naturally from the characters' inner worlds when they are children. In the final episode, when they are grown-ups, Maggie is an outcast, a "fallen woman", in conventional thinking, and Tom cannot and does not want to change his principles. The convention blocks him from forgiving Maggie's faults and

the understanding between them seems impossible. In the end, brother and sister are together again – the reconciliation comes forcibly, yet naturally, but somehow from the outer world. An ending that Adamson perceives to be "manipulated" (Adamson 2003: 330) as Maggie and Tom are killed by a piece of wooden machinery carried toward them by the flood.

Love is easier in childhood. Maggie is very fond of Philip's intelligence and pities him. She wants to give him love and she knows how it feels like to be mocked and judged because of the way you look. Maggie wants to make amends for the unfair way in which society treated Philip's difference[3]. Besides, Maggie feels peculiar tenderness toward deformed things (cf. Eliot 1994: 526). The only reason why she loves Philip is that she is quite sure about his returning her feelings. In their "first love scene" Maggie kisses Philip and gives him a promise: "I shall always remember you, and kiss you when I see you again, if it's ever so long" (Eliot 1994: 531). When she meets Philip again, she finds herself unable to fulfil her childhood promise because she is not a child anymore. She sees herself now from the social position of "a young lady" who has been to boarding school (a "normalizing" institution), and she knows that neither is such a greeting acceptable, nor would Philip hope for it. (cf. Eliot 1994: 532-533).

Tom's childhood also becomes tragic when he understands that he can never go back to the carefree days because presently he must take care of his ruined, poverty-stricken, and dishonoured family. It proves impossible for all the things from the past to be brought back to life. As a child, he believes that his father is a respectable man, and that he, Tom Tulliver, is a son of a respectable man. But things take a dreadful turn when Mr. Tulliver is categorized as "failed" and "bankrupt." Tom conforms to the demands of social duty from an early age but automatically, without applying his own agency. He appears not to be so clever but to have his adamant boyish feeling of justice. When he comes of age, he becomes subordinated to a type of social duty, which is already "dead" and withered. By following his oath in the family Bible and his dead father's last wish he succeeds in becoming again a master of Dorlcote Mill and in regarding Wakem as nothing but an enemy. But after all the work there is no "gladness or triumph" in his face (Eliot 1994: 754). After such fulfilment, Tom becomes an unnecessary character. He seems a remnant from a past age. He becomes the past he wants to preserve and forgets to move forward. Tom has just brought himself "**near** to the attainment of more than the old respectability which

[3] The research delves into the problem of Phillip's disability in terms of social imprisonment as well; however, due to constraints on space and scope, it has been omitted from the present paper.

had been the proud inheritance of the Dodsons and the Tullivers" (Eliot 1994: 754, emphasis added). While analysing a similar phenomenon in Tennyson's poetry through Heidegger and Levinas, Rowland describes the duty to the dead Other as an "*in-between-ness* of existence" accompanied by a "process of permanent enrichment of oneself in time through amassment of experiential validity, so that in its existence, the spirit of man comes closer, but never quite reaches, ultimate meaning" (Rowland 2014: 59). In Tom's case his existence is enriched by the act of fulfilling his father's wish, but when the wish is fulfilled, Tom realizes that he has lost himself and that he has been trapped in an inescapable *in-between-ness* barring him from "communicating" the present to a future of his own. He never falls in love, he never recognizes his weaknesses, and he never dreams about anything that is not related to retrieving the lost respectability of his family. Tom cannot regain the past from his childhood, his father's, and his sister's reputability and that is his own personal tragedy. He cannot adapt to the changes by individual choices. And the natural forces embodied in a flood come to eliminate those who struggle to adapt.

Being a woman as difference

The circumstances determining Maggie's tragedies are her externals. First, she is a woman; second, she has dark skin and looks like a gypsy; last but not least, she shows cleverness and talks well. If we look at her social position the picture does not get better. Her father is bankrupt, and he pities her because she has poor prospects of marriage just like her aunt Moss, who married a poor farmer. Maggie's mother, Mrs. Bessy Tulliver, does not seem to care for anything but her china, and her brother Tom is ready to punish her without showing empathy or understanding. Both from biological and social perspectives, she is doomed. Nevertheless, she is presented with two possibilities for marrying. The two candidates are Philip Wakem – the son of Mr. Tulliver's deadly foe, and Stephen Guest – Lucy's lover. Each of them is problematic. If Maggie chooses Philip Wakem, she will go against her father's and her brother's will, as well as against the "laws of attraction", against what is natural. If she chooses Stephen Guest, she will cause bitterness to her dear friends Lucy and Philip Wakem[4]. Such marriages would not be acceptable to her family and friends

[4]Maggie's choice between Philip and Stephen is difficult because the nineteenth century was the time of two conflicting ethical systems – the first one being the ethical system of traditional Christian values like self-sacrifice and brotherly love, and the second being the ethical system of modern values having their fundaments in natural

and the social system. Following Michel Foucault and his ideas about sexuality, Sharon Marcus argues that in the Victorian era "sexual interactions and unions continued to serve the purpose of alliance: to demarcate boundaries between races, classes, nations and especially between men and women" (Marcus 2012: 424-425). If a woman tries to raise or lower her class by some means, it is of no good. In *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy from the ancient family of the Earnshaws lowers herself by choosing to love Heathcliff who is described as "as dark almost as it came from the devil" and as talking "some gibberish that nobody could understand" (Brontë E. 2016: 37). Heathcliff's otherness is manifested in kin ("No soul knew to whom it belonged"; ibid. p. 37), appearance, and language. This love determines the tragic ending not only for Cathy but also for two wealthy families.

The Wakems and The Guests are richer than the Tullivers. The fact is that "fictional narratives aimed at middle-class readers rarely depicted happy marriages across class lines" (Marcus 2012: 427). Tom is sure that if Maggie married Philip, she would never be happy. Marcus gives an example with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but we can add some more eloquent examples with the begrimed marriage between Rosamond and Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, and the secret marriage between Godfrey Cass and Molly whom he never recognizes as his wife in *Silas Marner*. The real tragedy is that Maggie's tragedy is perpetual, but it never reaches the point of catharsis. It is always a restrained outburst of rebellion followed by suffocated suffering. She is often compared to tragic characters like Ajax (Adamson 2003: 319-321) or Antigone (Moldstad 1970: 528-530), but she cannot, by her action, bring the tragedy to an end. She cuts her hair, and she looks like an idiot, then the hairdresser repairs it, and she feels sorry. She pushes Lucy into the pond and then runs away to live with the gypsies, but she cannot fulfill this plan because she is too scared. As an adult, she is even less decisive. Maggie is not sure whether she loves Philip or just pities him. When she is finally committing something irreversible in a dreamy-like condition by eloping with Stephen, she "wakes up" and hesitates. And this hesitation guarantees her being sentenced to a social exile. In the second chapter of Book Seven, we learn that if Maggie came to St. Oggs as Mrs. Guest, it would have been perceived as "quite romantic", and society would have accepted her (cf. Eliot 1994: 760) but she comes as a degraded outcast because she chooses to act against nature

selection and individuality (cf. Gore 2020: 124). Maggie is a liminal character, sacrificed between the spiritual bloodshed of the two ethical systems.

and practicality – qualities so cherished by "men of maxims" who fail to recognize "the mysterious complexity of our life" (Eliot 1994: 765).

In the first chapter of Book Four (The Valley of Humiliation) George Eliot again breaks the fictionality of her imaginary world with the voice of a scientist who studies the relationships in society and its changes, trying to find their way in the soil of tradition. The author tells the reader: "I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie" (Eliot 1994: 596). Similarly, the readers are kindly invited to exercise their intellectual faculties in *Adam Bede*, where the act of *boundary crossing*[5] is disclosed to the reader: "for imagination is a licensed trespasser: it has no fear of dogs, but may climb over walls and peep in at windows with impunity. Put your face to one of the glass panes in the right-hand window: what do you see?" (Eliot 1994: 53). During such an act on the author's part the readers acknowledge that they are invited to participate in a special process in which the text openly unmasks its own fictionality. And by such means it appears as an *explanation*. According to Iser "fiction – as an explanation – functions as the constitutive basis of this reality" (Iser 1993: 12). The author clearly describes the reason for Tom and Maggie's tragedies – both of them are still tied to traditional beliefs (to the past) but "the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them" (Eliot 1994: 596). The "advance of mankind" (ibid.) brings with itself martyrs and victims and they are those who struggle to advance respectively. Eliot's method consists of portraying one of these "ordinary" tragedies while connecting it with the whole situation in the world: "we need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great" (Eliot 1994: 596). She is convinced that we can use this method adopted from the natural sciences in analysing

[5] The act of boundary-crossing is described by Wolfgang Iser as an act of wearing a mask that allows us to see something we want to see without being seen: "The mask is, of course, a restriction of the person, but it is also his extension, for the person must fictionalize himself as something else in order to reach beyond himself" (Iser 1993: 77). This mask allows readers to perceive "double meaning" and "the copresence of the conscious and the imaginary" appears to them "as a means of testing reality" (Iser 1993: 69). Both worlds (the real and the imaginary) are put "in brackets, so that they tend to become objects of observation through fiction, instead of providing conditions for its definition" (Iser 1993: 23). By openly thematizing the act of boundary-crossing Eliot intensifies the readers' attitude to treat the imaginary world as a matter of investigation and close examination instead of diving into it blindly and without any reflection or cognizance of their own position and responsibility.

human relationships: "In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations. … It is surely the same with the observation of human life" (Eliot 1994: 596). The small tissue taken from society would show the flaws of the whole social body if analyzed thoroughly and attentively. Lightman argues that scientific naturalism and literary realism are "Victorian siblings" because they share the pursuit of the objective point of view from which "to locate the truth or describe reality" (Lightman 2010: 25). Literature willingly makes science part of itself through detailed descriptions of the characters, careful analysis of their thoughts, actions, dreams, and social position, by pausing its experiment (the imaginary world) and by reflecting on the procedures for building it.

The attitudes of natural sciences toward finding the truth about the origin crystallize in Eliot's endeavour to explain Maggie's and Tom's transitional positions – between their ties with tradition and the inevitability of moving on and advancing. Iser's theory could be exemplified by Eliot's approach to building her imaginary world. The method for finding the truth about human thoughts and ways cannot be made explicit while this method is heavy with maxims. Her ethics achieves its effect through its plasticity. It escapes the ready-made formulas of science for seeking objectivity and develops a method for representing the truth without reservations to the imagination. We have the aim of the natural science preserved and yet modified and perpetually checked by the plasticity of the imagination: "moral judgements must remain shallow unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot" (Eliot 1994: 765). We cannot fully understand these special circumstances if we do not try to imagine what is the burden of a lot which differs from our own – an action which seems impossible for people armed with maxims and formulas. Helen Small tells us that Eliot's "key" to otherness could be achieved only through "complex combined processes of external observation of their [the characters'] physiology and behaviour, imaginative identification with their circumstances, and reliance on a common but historically always evolving vocabulary for subjective experience" (Small: 2012: 508).

A woman's imagination as tragedy

Another circumstance presupposing the fatality of Maggie's deranged choices is the readiness with which her reason fails her. While she is listening to the beautiful music produced by the duet, she could not proceed with her work. The music throws her into a euphoric state, and she

is overwhelmed with emotion that makes her both strong and weak - "strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance" (Eliot 1994: 704). Her eyes are dilated and full of a "**childish** expression of wondering delight" (Eliot 1994: 704, emphasis added). The heroine cannot help being powerfully influenced by the music: "Poor Maggie! She looked very beautiful when her soul was being played on in this way by the inexorable power of sound" (Eliot 1994: 704). According to Iser, the imaginary is helpful for our consciousness because "by modifying stances, it makes consciousness operative" (Iser 1993: 203). Scientific investigations in neuroscience also prove that "guided imagining is often very much like undergoing an experience for real" (Lillard 2013: 146). So long as the imaginary is perceived as an *as-if* construction, it is under control, under readers' own guidance, the boundaries are still crossed but there is an awareness of crossing them. When this *as-if* construction fluctuates and "the images take over, consciousness is modified into nonactuality" (Iser 1993: 203).

The choice between Maggie giving herself up to the sensory world created by the interplay between the real-world music and her inner world (her faculties of cognition) of unrestrained imagination, makes us witness the helplessness of her consciousness making way for different flaws. Iser observes that: "Illusions, dreams, daydreams, and hallucinations show how consciousness may be overwhelmed by the effects of its productions" (Iser 1993: 204). Maggie's lonely days are full of such daydreams, visions, and plans: "she would go to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her" (Eliot 1994: 608) but in the middle of her daydream the voice of reality would "pierce through Maggie like a sword" (Eliot 1994: 608). She pushes her fantasies to such an extent that she voluntarily negates "fantasy as otherness" (Iser 1993: 172). Her imagination becomes her only means of survival.

Maggie's confinement in the house and her lack of friends lead unavoidably to imaginary worlds where she can create imaginary social bonds without the fear of being turned into an object of mockery. But this cannot last long. Human is a social animal and that is why confinement equals a severe punishment because it is unnatural: "Solitary confinement is one of the severest punishments which can be inflicted" (Darwin 1981: 84). The long dwelling in such safe imaginary worlds has its limits and becomes unbearable at a certain point. Then there is a longing for reality and the hunger for real interactions and sensations could be turned, as Philip says, into a "savage appetite": "You will be thrown into the world

some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite" (Eliot 1994: 639). And this appetite or, rebellion against the imaginary could take different shapes and forms – from radical uprisings to tragical suppression.

A woman's imagination as tragedy: discussion with examples from other literary works

It is not only Maggie who fails to recognize the "as-if" construction of her daydreams. Six weeks after her wedding, Dorothea from Eliot's *Middlemarch* is weeping bitterly because the image of her world built within her imagination falls into pieces when applied to reality (or when realized). She feels "some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future, which replaces the imaginary" (Eliot 2011: 207). After her marriage, Dorothea feels that the relationship with her husband is "gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand" from its earlier version available now only in her perishing "maiden dream" (Eliot 2011: 208). The discrepancy between the dream world and the real world brings a great deal of confusion to the young girl's inexperienced life. Her dream of devoting herself to her husband's studies becomes a burden to her. Her remonstrance is manifested when she declares to herself that she will not proceed with her devotion after his death. There is a "difference between the devotion to the living" and the "indefinite promise of devotion to the dead" (Eliot 2011: 510) and the girl shudders to think that Casaubon might want such a thing even after his death. He wants it but Dorothea does not proceed with his studies and marries Ladislaw – two acts of rebellion against the authoritarian last wishes of her deceased husband as well as against her own maiden dream.

Hetty, the pretty butter-maker from Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), with her "little silly imagination" (Eliot 1994: 74) thinks how handsome it would have been to have the rich Captain Donnithorne as her husband. His "face and presence" are "haunting her waking and sleeping dreams" (ibid.). Hetty thinks of him not because she loves him, but because she wants to raise her class by marrying him and becoming a lady. While she is worshipping herself in the mirror, she tries to achieve a fictional, richer, and nobler image of herself by attempting to imitate a particular picture of a lady which she has seen in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing room. By being conscious of her beauty, Hetty imagines an invisible presence contemplating and admiring her: "And Hetty looked at herself to-night with quite a different sensation from what she had ever felt before; there was an invisible spectator whose eye rested on her like morning on the

flowers" (ibid. p. 111). Her vanity, nourished by her imagination, prevents her from seeing that Captain Donnithorne would never marry her. It also makes her neglect a suitable and decent match in the face of the hardworking Adam Bede.

Helen, from Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), falls into the same trap of the imagination. The woman thinks that she might have some influence on Mr. Huntington's untamed character and save him from errors: "…and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction" (Anne Brontë 1996: 117). This romantic and self-sacrificing attitude makes her life a living hell. And she escapes her husband only when he is dead.

Darwin argues that there are differences in the mental powers of the two sexes. While "Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness", man "is the rival of other men; he delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness" (Darwin 1981: 326). Darwin's statement is truthful so long as social stereotypes in Victorian England are taken into account. In Hetty's case, we can see that women could be selfish and could rebel against their lot. They can be competitive, strong, and even brave like Marian Halcombe from *The Woman in White* (1859) by Wilkie Collins. The point from which the difference between men and women starts is not sex but education and the social "prisons" it creates. Women are educated to be "angels of the house", or said more plainly, to be confined within, and not exposed to worldly experiences. Having only the imaginary world as a way to freedom, they often use it, and after using it, they are forced to interact with the real world, which is mainly, the world of their husbands or lovers. We could see that clearly when Stephen complains about Lucy being busy with the bazaar-work. He says that such work is "taking young ladies from the duties of the domestics hearth". After that he clearly states his opinion about the role of women in society: "I should like to know what is the proper function of women, if it is not to make reasons for husbands to stay at home… If this [women going out on their personal errands] goes much longer, the bonds of society will be dissolved" (Eliot 1994: 694). This narrow perception of the social world makes women's life and choices embittered and imprisoned. Helen Graham, being provoked by Mr. Markham and his mother, speaks about the unfair differences in education. Sons are encouraged to "prove all things by their own experience" while daughters are sent into the world "unarmed" against their "foes" (cf. Brontë A. 1996: 27). She speaks from experience because

she herself has been "unarmed" and unprepared for her vicious husband. She has been blinded by her own "blissful thoughts" and his personality proves to be only a "creation of an over-excited imagination" (Brontë A. 1996: 134). The husband's roles in the cases discussed are the reasons for women's dreams as well as the most mischievous intruders into them.

Maggie's imaginary Walter Scott, Dorothea's imaginary Mr. Casaubon, Hetty's imaginary Captain Donnithorne, and Helen's imaginary Huntington exemplify imaginary relationships. Maggie's relationship with Walter Scott who will be able to understand Maggie's capacity is an example of building a tie with "inaccessible real others" (Gleason 2013: 252). Dorothea', Hetty's, and Helen's cases are of making ties with "imaginary versions of real others". The persons who create the imaginary relationships "imagine the interactions to be reciprocal", but the fact is that "the entire relationship is conjured up and governed up by one person" (Gleason 2013: 252). The imaginary relationships could be so powerful that they could influence "interpersonal perceptions and expectations" (Gleason 2013: 253) mainly because pretending "involves mental states – desires, emotions, beliefs" (Lillard 2013: 134). Imaginary relationships are useful for social interactions only when they are recognized as unreal because they create a "dynamic forum for practicing, exploring, and managing relationship issues" (Gleason 2013: 252). The problem is that the literary characters described in our text tend to suspend recognition until it becomes too late.

The tragedy of the imagination occurs, firstly, because social circumstances prevent women from gaining actual experience of the real world, and secondly, because lacking enough experience of the real world makes it harder for the imagination to be practiced as an "as-if" construction. As a consequence, Maggie's, Dorothea's, Hetty's, and Helen's imaginary worlds cannot be perceived as something more than feverish illusions trying to burst open the door of their starving intellectual (or social) faculties.

Conclusions

The aim of this text was to show how the differences in *The Mill on the Floss* could lead to tragic scenarios. For more precision, the analysis was focused on two main realms of difference: childhood as difference and being a woman as difference.

The analytical platform adopted combined ideas from Iser's literary theory and scientific naturalism. The purpose of such a platform was to justify the fictional stories as treatises on human relationships. The reasons

stated were that imagination could be an object of pragmatization (Iser) and that Eliot's narrative voice creates favourable circumstances for dramatization.

The assertion that childhood can be seen as a tragical period is rooted in the societal perception of it as deviation. The main reason for experiencing tragedies in this period of human life is the unbearable tension between childhood and memory.

Being a woman as difference is perceived as a tragedy when the woman tries to raise or to lower her social position, when she tries to act through instances of the imagination (her main source of experience), being initially deprived of real experiences, and when it is wanted from a woman to make a choice which is *a priori* doomed to be fatal.

The childhood social prisons are seen in the memory and the boarding school. The woman's social prisons are discerned in her imagination and her husband's home.

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Eliot, being closely acquainted with Victorian scientific, psychological, and social works often depicts the "clash between the needs of the individual and the demands of social duty" (Lightman, 2010: 27). She excels in her endeavours of portraying the clash as truthfully as possible, paying special attention to enhancing the reader's acknowledgment of the "as-if" construction, turning her novels into both remarkable pieces of art and scientific treatises of human relationships.

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