



The Mill on the Floss –George Eliot

The Mill on the Floss Essay Questions

1. **Compare and contrast Maggie's love for Philip, Stephen, and Tom.**

Maggie's love for each of these characters is very different. Her love for Tom seems most passionate when they are children and grows into something more complicated as they age. It is a love that is symbolic of her deep and often constricting and painful ties to her past, her family, and her community - for though she loves him, he often tries to control her, and he does not truly understand her.

Contrasting with that for Tom, Maggie's love for Philip is built largely on similarities between them. His love for music, art, and literature, and his significant intelligence, mean she can converse with him in a way she cannot with any of her family members. This love, though, lacks any physical passion. The only physical aspect of her affections is that of sympathy for his deformity. Their bond is one of the mind.

Finally, Maggie's love for Stephen seems almost purely physical. He has admirable characteristics, certainly - he is witty, charming, and his admiration for Dr. Kenn reflects well on him - but we never see what specifically in his character draws Maggie to him. Rather there is a sense of a strong physical passion which leads her into a kind of mental disengagement or trance. Through Stephen's eyes, Maggie sees herself as a desirable lady for the first time - someone who is acceptable to society. Ironically, their passion causes great scandal for Maggie.

2. **Critique the ending of *The Mill on the Floss*. Does Maggie's death enrich or detract from the novel's themes?**

The ending of *The Mill on the Floss*, though dissatisfying in a few ways, enriches the novel's themes. Not long before Maggie was swept away by a current that was moving her towards satisfying her individual desires by eloping with Stephen. Instead, she fought to come back to St. Ogg's, and she finds herself again driven by a current, but this time towards family, community, and the annihilation of the individual. The hyper-idealized imagery of Maggie and Tom's death scene reinforces this idea of how powerful the past's hold can be, although in this case it is a simplified version of the past, one that ignores its pitfalls and suffocations, which are ultimately symbolically expressed in the drowning of the two main characters.

3. **Where do Maggie and Tom each fall in the distinction between the Dodsons and the Tullivers? Explain.**

Although in the first half of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is often explicitly associated with the (darker) Tullivers and Tom with the (fairer) Dodsons, by the end of the novel it is clear that the dichotomy is much more complicated than that, and has shifted over time. Certainly, Maggie is physically more like a Tulliver and Tom more like a Dodson. With Maggie's intelligence and individuality, and Tom's practicality and sense of justice, it would at first glance seem that the breakdown of their characteristics follows that of their looks.



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Yet after their loss of innocence, they each move to the other side of the divide. Maggie becomes fixated with renunciation, much like obsessively frugal Mrs. Glegg, and Tom becomes more and more self-reliant and insistent on doing things his own way, much like Mr. Tulliver. In the end, Maggie chooses the ties of family and the community - the true core of the Dodson philosophy - over individual desire, while Tom remains largely alone. The switch is represented in the fact that, though Mr. Tulliver seemed to favor Maggie her whole life, on his deathbed he is much more focused on Tom, while Mrs. Tulliver, who greatly favored Tom in his youth, chooses to move out with Maggie after her shame. Even Mrs. Glegg, so critical and cautious of Maggie as a girl, becomes a true champion for her after her scandal.

4. **Describe the thematic import of Maggie's decision to relinquish Stephen.**

Maggie chooses not to marry Stephen even though to do so would give her both emotional happiness and economic comfort and security. In addition to her own pain, her relinquishment comes too late to save Philip and Lucy the pain her marriage to Stephen would cause, and she will have to pay a significant price socially. Thus the fact that Maggie still chooses not to marry him shows how strongly she values keeping her ties to family, community, and tradition over individual freedom, expression, and happiness. In addition, it shows the heavy weight of the responsibility of choice - her first choice, to go with him, hurts those she loves and does intense damage to her reputation, and her second choice, to leave him, does nothing to rectify this, and causes both her and Stephen significant pain. Also, Maggie bears the brunt of criticism for her role in the thwarted elopement, despite Stephen's letter absolving her of blame. As a woman with low social standing, Maggie is painted as a harpy who preyed on Stephen, the son of a prominent businessman. Again Eliot illustrates the disparity between the genders endemic of Maggie's time.

5. **Choose one of Maggie's childhood conflicts and explain how it foreshadows her greater troubles in adult life.**

When Maggie reacts to her family members discussing her hair and its unfortunate nature by cutting it off, it is not because she thinks it will make her pretty, but because of two desires - she wants to not be noticed for it anymore, a "deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it," and she wants everyone to think she is "clever" for this solution. Almost instantly after the act is done, though, she regrets it: "she could see clearly enough, now the thing was done, that it was very foolish" but she had "rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse" (55).

This foreshadows Maggie's adult troubles in many ways. First, it shows the conflicting drives she feels between her individual desire and the community's desires, as she is spurred to action by a wanting to blend into the community, but also by wanting to be singled out for her cleverness. And it certainly foreshadows the regret she frequently feels after almost every choice she makes, since her choices are so often between satisfying those two desires and so she must always sacrifice one. Most significantly, of course, it foreshadows the regret she feels after staying in the boat with Stephen, and just like she can't uncut her hair, she cannot undo the hurt that that decision caused, even though she comes back to St. Ogg's unmarried.

Many of Maggie's childhood actions follow a pattern of her indulging a whim followed by recrimination and regret: Maggie running away to stay with the gypsies, Maggie spilling Tom's



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wine by rushing towards him unaware, Maggie forgetting to feed Tom's rabbits (though her forgetting stems from childish self-absorption rather than whim), Maggie pushing Lucy into the mud to get back at Tom for spiting her, etc.

6. **Compare and contrast Tom and Maggie. How much are their respective successes and failures a function of gender and how much a function of their distinct characteristics?**

The defining difference between Tom and Maggie's characters seems to be decisiveness. Tom makes all his decisions deliberately and never looks back. This relates both to his willfulness and inflexibility, and his near obsession with justice - he can't understand anyone else making a mistake, because he doesn't ever believe he has himself.

Maggie, on the other hand, is completely indecisive. She will either feel so desperately torn between two alternatives that when she does make a choice, it seems random and she almost always immediately regrets it. Or she acts out of a moment of high passion with little understanding of the consequences, and again almost always immediately regrets it.

She cannot reconcile her cravings for individual expression with the places open for her in the community, so her emotions and desires are constantly in flux. Tom, on the other hand, has both more options and more opportunity for positive action, so he is able to act decisively because he has a clear path. Even though Tom is not as bright as Maggie, his determination and the opportunities available to him as a man engender success. It is not difficult to imagine that in a world that offered her gender more freedoms and ambitions, Maggie could have used her intellectual curiosity and emotional energy towards a greater purpose.

7. **Do a close reading of Book Fourth, Chapter I, and explain its thematic importance in the novel.**

This chapter, using ruins on the Rhine and the Rhone, illustrates the dichotomy between the collective, suffocating world of the older generation in St. Ogg's, and the striving for individuality in Maggie and Tom's generation, and particularly in Maggie. In doing so, it yokes this striving with progress - with "the onward tendency of human things" - and shows how that tendency combined with the emotional ties to the earlier generation creates tragedies "by hundreds of obscure hearths" (223), universalizing Maggie's experience and showing how it is critical to the progress of society.

8. **Compare and contrast Maggie and Lucy, as children and as adults.**

In childhood, Lucy is presented as the model for how the St. Ogg's community believes a female child should behave - quiet, pretty, submissive, good, light-complexioned - while Maggie constantly struggles to be pleasing to the community, and almost constantly fails, with her dark, straight hair, her curiosity and eager intelligence, her high spirit and emotionalism. By juxtaposing these two characters, we see just how difficult it would be for Maggie to fit into the female paradigm of her time.

As they age, Maggie continues to face struggle after struggle, some caused by outside circumstances, some by her internal conflicts, while, excepting her mother's death, Lucy never faces any real hardship until Maggie runs off with Stephen. Though Lucy's kindness and



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generosity, for Maggie particularly, is vast and she is impossible to dislike, we see through this contrast that Maggie's struggles have added to her vitality - to both the reader and to Stephen she is a starkly more interesting character than Lucy.

9. **What does *The Mill on the Floss* show are the benefits of hardship?**

In Stephen Guest's first scene in the novel, he says that he and Lucy "are Adam and Eve unfallen, in paradise" (297), which, combined with Eliot's early yoking together of the fall with Maggie and Tom's loss of innocence, shows that they have known little hardship. This puts them in contrast with Maggie and Tom, and though they are certainly an easy pair to be around, this does seem to provide a brittle cast to their characters - it is unclear how they would handle hardship - and certainly they are not as interesting as the Tulliver children.

But hardship does not just make characters more interesting - it makes them human, it gives others the chance to support them, as when Mrs. Stelling rises above herself to show the children kindness, and it helps them grow. In childhood, Maggie frequently makes excuses for her behavior, but after going through the hardships that make her an adult, when she has run off with Stephen she never once tries to excuse herself, taking full responsibility for the wrong she has done and actively seeking the justice she believes she deserves.

10. **Compare and contrast Tom and Mr. Tulliver. Why does Tom succeed where Mr. Tulliver failed?**

Both Tom and Mr. Tulliver are driven, independent, prideful, and often obsessive, especially towards the idea of justice. Yet Mr. Tulliver loses all of his property and self-worth, while Tom is able to work to get it all back and even restores himself and his mother to his home. Mr. Tulliver's problem comes largely from where his personality is more like Maggie's. Both are impetuous and emotional, and make decisions far more out of emotion than out of cold rationality - thus Mr. Tulliver insists on paying back Mrs. Glegg's loan after she has offended him; thus he won't insist on repayment from his brother-in-law because of his love for his sister and his daughter; and thus he attacks Mr. Wakem, bringing on his own death before he can see his home back in Tulliver hands. Tom, on the other hand, is ruled by his sense of justice before all else, so that he is rarely overtaken by emotion and is able to focus on accumulating the money and honor that his father lost.

 **The Mill on the Floss Quiz**

1 Why does Tom get mad at Maggie when he first gets home from school?
A. SHE STOLE HIS JAM PUFF.
B. SHE WAS SHOWING OFF HER SUPERIOR INTELLIGENCE.
C. SHE WASN'T HAPPY ENOUGH TO SEE HIM.
D. SHE LET HIS RABBITS DIE.
2 Which character intentionally wears her shabbiest clothes?
A. MRS. TULLIVER
B. MRS. GLEGG
C. LUCY



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D. MAGGIE
3What directly precedes Maggie deciding to run away to the gypsies?
A. THE TULLIVERS SEND TOM AWAY TO SCHOOL.
B. MAGGIE PUSHES LUCY INTO THE MUD.
C. MAGGIE ACCIDENTALLY KILLS TOM'S RABBITS.
D. TOM TELLS MAGGIE HE NEVER WANTS TO SEE HER AGAIN.
4People of what profession does Mr. Tulliver particularly dislike?
A. LAWYERS
B. DOCTORS
C. LANDLORDS
D. BANKERS
5What does Mrs. Tulliver think is going to kill Maggie?
A. WILD ANIMALS
B. LACK OF SENSE
C. DROWNING
D. CURIOSITY
6What was St. Ogg's profession?
A. MILLER
B. FARMER
C. CLERGYMAN
D. BOATMAN
7Who says of girls, "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow"?
A. TOM TULLIVER
B. STEPHEN GUEST
C. MR. TULLIVER
D. MR. STELLING
8Who helps Tom get his first job?
A. MR. DEANE
B. BOB JAKIN
C. MR. WAKEM
D. MR. GLEGG
9What is Mr. Tulliver's nickname for Maggie?
A. BRAINY
B. LITTLE WENCH
C. BUNNY



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D. MAGS
10 When Mr. Tulliver loses his lawsuit against Mr. Pivart, who owns the mortgage on the mill?
A. MR. MOSS
B. MR. DEANE
C. MR. WAKEM
D. MR. FORLEY
11 Which character's gift leads to a spiritual awakening for Maggie?
A. TOM TULLIVER
B. BOB JAKIN
C. STEPHEN GUEST
D. PHILIP WAKEM
12 After Tom drops the sword on his foot, who tells him that he won't be permanently lame?
A. MR. STELLING
B. MRS. STELLING
C. MAGGIE
D. PHILIP
13 What is Dorlcote Mill's town?
A. ST. OGG'S
B. DOVER
C. KING'S LORTON
D. BATH
14 Who has a physical deformity?
A. BOB JAKIN
B. PHILIP WAKEM
C. MRS. GLEGG
D. MR. WAKEM
15 What characteristic led Mr. Glegg to think Mrs. Glegg would be a compatible wife?
A. HER THRIFTINESS
B. HER GENEROSITY
C. HER GENTLENESS
D. HER INTELLIGENCE
16 What is Mrs. Pullet particularly prone to doing?
A. LYING
B. CRYING
C. TELLING JOKES
D. LECTURING



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17 Who inadvertently causes Mr. Wakem to buy Dorlcote Mill?

- A. MRS. TULLIVER
- B. MR. GLEGG
- C. PHILIP WAKEM
- D. GUEST & CO.

18 Why does Philip think his father wouldn't like him to get a letter from Maggie?

- A. HIS FATHER CARES ABOUT POSITION AND WEALTH, NEITHER OF WHICH MAGGIE HAS.
- B. HIS FATHER DESPISES MR. TULLIVER.
- C. HIS FATHER IS BOTHERED BY MAGGIE'S PRECOCIOUS INTELLIGENCE.
- D. HIS FATHER IS WORRIED IT WOULD ALIENATE MR. TULLIVER FURTHER.

19 How old is Maggie when her father loses the mill?

- A. 9
- B. 17
- C. 13
- D. 6

20 What makes Maggie change her mind about Bob Jakin?

- A. HIS OFFERING MONEY TO TOM
- B. HIS KIND TREATMENT OF TOM AFTER HE INJURES HIS FOOT
- C. HIS HELPING TOM FIND INVESTMENTS
- D. HIS GIFT OF BOOKS TO HER

21 What weapon does Mr. Tulliver use against Mr. Wakem?

- A. A POCKETKNIFE
- B. A SHOVEL
- C. A REVOLVER
- D. A WHIP

22 What did Tom Tulliver give Bob Jakin in their childhood?

- A. A PUPPY
- B. A BOOK
- C. A POCKETKNIFE
- D. A FISHING ROD

23 Which best describes Mr. Tulliver's feelings about Tom going to school with Philip Wakem?

- A. FEAR THAT PHILIP WILL BE SUPERIOR TO TOM
- B. WORRY THAT TOM WILL BEFRIEND PHILIP
- C. SATISFACTION THAT HIS SON IS GETTING AS GOOD AN EDUCATION AS MR. WAKEM'S
- D. DISMAY



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24When Maggie is struggling over her feelings for Stephen, what does Lucy think is going on?

- A. SHE THINKS MAGGIE'S UPSET ABOUT PHILIP.
- B. SHE THINKS MAGGIE IS JEALOUS LUCY IS GOING TO BE MARRIED.
- C. SHE THINKS MAGGIE IS DEPRESSED THAT SHE CAN'T HAVE THE SAME FREEDOM AS HER BROTHER.
- D. SHE THINKS MAGGIE IS DEPRESSED ABOUT HER FATHER'S DEATH.

25What is the Floss?

- A. A FARM
- B. A LAKE
- C. A TOWN
- D. A RIVER

26 To whom is the following addressed: "At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong?"

- A. STEPHEN
- B. PHILIP
- C. TOM
- D. MAGGIE

27 What does not contribute to Mr. Tulliver's downfall?

- A. HIS GREED
- B. HIS GENEROSITY TO HIS SISTER
- C. HIS LITIGIOUSNESS
- D. HIS DISLIKE OF BEING INDEBTED TO THE DODSON FAMILY