



THE CORINTHIAN
The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College

The Corinthian

Volume 16

Article 3

2015

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Matthew (2015) "Dickens and Eliot: A Tale of Two Feminists," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 16 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol16/iss1/3>

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Dickens and Eliot: A Tale of Two Feminists

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It has been (and will continue to be) argued that authors always portray characters of their own sex in a more complete way. It is because of this, and well-known facts about the time period during which he wrote, that Charles Dickens is rarely considered a feminist writer. George Eliot, who wrote in nearly the same time period, is often lauded as an exemplary feminist writer. But through his characterization of Miss Havisham and Estella in *Great Expectations*, Dickens shows himself to be more than equal to Eliot in that field of writing. Her own Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on The Floss* has often been cited as an example of a feminist character, but under closer scrutiny appears only to conform to social norms of the time period, albeit in a noble manner. She is not a fully developed personality. Miss Havisham and Estella may be the more despicable, and distinctly less likeable characters, but they are also unquestionably more fully rounded, and therefore more capable of truly being called feminist characters.

What is important to keep in mind when discussing Eliot's *The Mill on The Floss* is the difference between a woman-centered novel and a feminist novel. A novel that has a woman at its center can be said to defy the patriarchal norm in that instance, but it does not inherently

become a feminist novel. These novels in recent years have been adopted as honorary feminist tomes when perhaps they should not have been without first further inspection. They are often quasi-autobiographical in nature, as Eliot's work has been noted to be. The inherent problem with an autobiographical charting of oppression is the overwhelming urge to romanticize, and this does not serve the feminist cause in any positive manner. Eliot is distinctly guilty of this through her characterization of Maggie Tulliver. Even as a child, Maggie is portrayed as being far beyond her years: "Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done" (55). In short, Maggie is unrealistically principled. Eliot cannot be entirely blamed for wanting to show Maggie as an unflappable character in the face of overwhelming odds, but does it serve a purpose? The ultimate goal of feminism is equality, and portraying a nearly flawless female character that bears her pain with nobility does nothing to forward that. Maggie is too perfect, and in her perfection, fails to be the sort of transgressive character that she would have to be to achieve any feminist goal. For a female character in a nineteenth century novel, simply remaining unflappable in the face of oppression does not merit a feminist designation. It is admirable, but does nothing to further the cause of other women.

Eliot duly notes the difficulties Maggie must face after refusing to marry Stephen Guest (a remarkable feat of self-control in and of itself, given her financial situation) and returning to St. Ogg's: "Public opinion, in these cases, is always of the feminine gender—not the world, but the world's wife" (397). Maggie faces extreme deg-

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radation in her home society to which she has returned only out of a sense of duty to her family. She has no other obligation to return home. She is truly a remarkable woman. Most would argue that Maggie has not even done anything wrong. Yet the town chooses not to accept her into society, and her aunt offers to take her in: “[Y]ou shall have a shelter in her house, if you go to her dutiful” (405). But Maggie chooses not to accept her aunt’s kindness. Maggie has done nothing wrong, and has no reason not to accept what amounts to an invitation back into proper society, so why will she not accept it? Because Maggie is a saint. Maggie chooses to do penance for a crime never committed. She chooses (and there is an undeniable symbolism present) to live at the rectory instead. Maggie is an unreasonably excellent person. What is Eliot getting at, portraying Maggie as the most stoic literary character ever to grace pages?

She may be trying to create a feminist hero, but in reality she creates the opposite. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar say, Maggie becomes “most monstrous when she tries to turn herself into an angel of renunciation and self-denial” (491). Instead of transgressing against the patriarchal paradigm, perfect Maggie is actually molding herself to it. She takes the blame fully on herself, both during her childhood renunciation, and after her doomed elopement with Stephen Guest. What she is really doing by her penance in the rectory is acquiescing entirely to what Tom (the embodiment of patriarchy) has programmed her to do. It is, as Mary Rogers describes in *Contemporary Feminist Theory*, “an accommodating consciousness—a way of getting by, a kind of cognitive treading water” (33). Maggie could not fit this descrip-

tion more aptly. She “treads water” through her constant self-denial. She refuses to take notice of the world around her as a kind of denial-process. She only takes note of her own “failings” and seeks to correct them as if it will help her problems. She even acknowledges as much to Philip Wakem: “I’ve been a great deal happier...since I have given up thinking about what is easy and pleasant, and being discontented because I couldn’t have my own will. Our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing” (246). What she fails to realize is that there is no solution for her problems without transgression from the society in which she lives. She must get outside of societal norms to help herself, but she cannot bring herself to do it. She ends up taking all blame on herself. For Maggie to be a true feminist character, for her to attempt to achieve any equality, she would need to rebel, truly rebel: “Feminist’ connotes activism and shaking things up” (Rogers 1). Maggie does precisely the opposite of this. She accepts failure as a part of life, that her life is truly predetermined. She says that she is happier accepting her fate and not trying to change it. While there is an undeniable nobility in Maggie’s acceptance of her fate, it does not make her a feminist character, but a character who helps to uphold patriarchal norms through her inactivity.

Perhaps the worst aspect of Maggie’s character is the illusion of independence she creates. Maggie is insistent on being “independent.” When her Aunt Glegg offers her a place to stay after her fall, she responds, “I can’t live with any one, or be dependent on them” (405). It is a demonstrably untrue statement. Through her very decision to come back to St. Ogg’s and do penance, she is beholden

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to Tom. Tom represents the patriarchy as clearly as any character could: “Tom believes in justice not simply because he can expect always to be judged favorably, but because he defines justice as consonant with his conception of his personal rights” (Putzell 229). He is the embodiment of an entitled male. He shows throughout the novel that he feels he can never be wrong, but he takes great zeal in dealing out punishment, especially to Maggie. And yet, this is also the character that Maggie is devoted to. Maggie’s devotion is to the patriarchy. She continually renounces her own desires, for Phillip, for Stephen, even for reading, all for Tom. And how does he treat her when she returns? With scorn: “You will find no home with me,” he says to her (392). If Eliot were a true feminist, would the final picture left in the minds of readers be of Maggie risking (and losing) her own life in order to clutch to this pitiable creature in her last moments? This is how *The Mill on The Floss* ends: with Maggie clutching to her brother in death, the only character in the novel who has continually held Maggie back. It is a fitting ending: Maggie and the patriarchy that she continually bows before, going down together.

Great Expectations, like *The Mill on The Floss*, has a troubling ending, but not nearly as much so. And while Eliot’s work seems to merit such an ending, Dickens’ novel is saddled with an ending that seems wrong, given how it has been led up to. *Great Expectations* is not a woman-centered novel, and Dickens is rarely looked to as a feminist writer. But his female characters in this novel are greater examples of feminist characters than Eliot’s Maggie. Miss Havisham and Estella are as Peter Scheckner describes, “Crazy or crazed, cold, calloused” (237). This

cannot be denied, and neither can it be denied that in his earlier works Dickens can sometimes be unfair to women (with some notable exceptions like David Copperfield's aunt Betsey Trotwood), but *Great Expectations* came at the tail end of a long career, and as a result comes with all of the benefits of a wiser man's mind. His female characters may still have cruel streaks, but not because they are female. There are reasons given for the damaged personalities. Miss Havisham says early on to Estella, "Well? You can break his heart" (51). And this is always Miss Havisham's goal. She never shies away from it, and if Dickens did not explain such behavior it would be easy to label him a chauvinist, creating dastardly female characters for the fun of it. But Miss Havisham is truly a damaged woman, and Dickens takes the time to explain why. This is even more remarkable given Dickens' tendency to ignore characterization for the furthering of plot. Jesse Rosenthal says of Dickensian characters, that they wait "for something else to happen. Stuck in a static moment of description...waiting for the plot to kick in" (26). Dickens' novels are long, sprawling, and rely mostly on plot to engage the reader. *Great Expectations*, however, is one of Dickens' most compact novels, and the characters are dealt with on a more personal level.

First Miss Havisham: she is despicable. Miss Havisham has a reason to be the way she is. As Herbert Pocket explains her past history with men to his dear Handel, "She perfectly idolized him. He practised on her affection in that systematic way, that he got great sums of money from her" (173). Miss Havisham was played for a fool by a con-man, and it hurt her greatly. If this had been Maggie Tulliver, she would have borne it stoically and gone home

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College to have Tom fix the problem for her. Miss Havisham is an equal to her male counterpart characters. She reacts like a human being, and not like a woman-robot hybrid.

She was done a horrible injustice and is making up for it in the only way her mind can allow: "Miss Havisham is not positively portrayed as evil. The tragedy of her life, as well as the pernicious effect she has on Estella, is a criticism of the confines which restricted women to a life centered on feeling" (Ioannou 145). It should not be ignored that her object is terrible, but she should not be taken unfairly to task. Victorian society has taught her to live a life of feeling, and she is using that to her advantage as best she can - she feels a great injustice. Unlike Eliot's Maggie, Miss Havisham is able to take care of herself. Maggie may claim the need for "independence" but she is never severed from Tom. She pushes all of her true feeling inwards and allows Tom to lord over her. No one lords over Miss Havisham.

There is a power that is exuded from the women of *Great Expectations*. Pip's sister raises him up "by hand" and Joe is more of a friend than a father figure. There is a different breed of gentleman at work in this novel. A gentleman who is not afraid of women being independent: "*Great Expectations* contains a version of masculinity which is mature and broad enough to include feelings of tenderness towards other men and women, and to endorse a female ideal which is both erotic and powerful" (Ioannou 142). Pip fears and respects Estella: "The unqualified truth is, I loved Estella with the love of a man" (223). Estella wields her feminine charms as a form of entitlement, the way all men in her time period are allowed to do, simply for being men. She is very much like a

man in her ability to wreak havoc and cruelty. Her faults are obvious, but she is all the more desirous for them. It is hard to imagine Estella existing within the same universe as Maggie Tulliver. Estella is an avenger, set loose on the world of men by Miss Havisham, while Maggie placates every male she comes into contact with. She gives in to Stephen Guest way too far, nearly to her own demise. She leads on Phillip, despite her lack of sexual desire for him, and she is always at Tom's beck and call.

Estella, unlike Maggie, is not noble in her behavior, but this is for the better. She does not treat Pip well. She does, however, have moments where she tries to warn Pip: "You must know," said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, "that I have no heart" (228). What Estella has that Maggie does not is *contradictions*. Humans, women, have contradictions. Estella obeys Miss Havisham, but her humanity is confirmed by her acknowledgement that what she is doing is wrong. Maggie only acknowledges that what she is doing is wrong according to Tom. Tom (despite his rational character) holds onto his father's grudge, upholds his patriarchal hold over Maggie, and bans her from seeing Philip. Maggie expresses regret that their meetings must take place in secret. She says to Philip, "I have never felt that I was right in giving way about seeing you" (272). And she is not incorrect in saying that clandestine meetings can be wrong, but her meetings with Phillip needed not be in secret. It is Tom who unreasonably forces her to do it in secret. He is the architect of her supposed wrongdoing, much as Miss Havisham is of Estella's. The key difference is that Estella breaks the mold and warns Pip. She also (instead of breaking Pip) falls in love with him as

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College well, breaking the cycle of destruction. Estella does what is required of her to be a feminist character: she transgresses against what holds her back.

George Eliot has a chance with her novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, to use her own experience of degradation to a positive end. She chooses not to do so. Her character, Maggie Tulliver, is dealt a very poor hand in life. She is constantly on the wrong side of fortune and is always the character who does nothing wrong, but suffers all of the consequences. Maggie Tulliver bears all of her life's mistreatments with a superhuman nature and chooses not to rebel against the society that has done terrible things to her. Charles Dickens, with *Great Expectations*, is telling the story of a man. It is not a woman-centric novel, or usually considered a feminist novel, and yet he uses his opportunity as an author more wisely than Eliot. The female characters of Miss Havisham and Estella are not dealt kind lots in life. But they do not accept it meekly as Maggie does. Miss Havisham is angry, as she has a right to be, and she creates a man-slaying monster in Estella. Miss Havisham and Estella each show in their own way that they are human beings, and there is no greater feminist mode of writing than simply showing female characters as equal to their male counterparts.

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