THE EXPRESSION OF
SEXUALITY
IN
GEORGE ELIOT’S
NOVELS
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I. FOREWORD

“There was once a society that is still held above all others to be the paradigm of sexual hypocrisy”¹ – these are the words which mark the beginning of a detailed examination about love and sexuality in the Victorian period. In another examination, George Eliot’s creative output of those days is described as follows: “George Eliot’s work represents a (...) protest against the conventional erotic paradigm”². These two statements already incorporate the essence of the following essay: obviously, there is a striking tension between official morality standards and the way the famous 19th century writer George Eliot dealt with them. The first citation proves that the topic is a delicate one and hard to grasp. Nevertheless, I will try to present a brief survey of the Victorian sexual morality which shall serve as the starting point of the following examination. It will reveal the clashes and the parallels of the perception of sexuality by society and by George Eliot.

The reader should note that in chapter one it is not the author George Eliot that is at the centre of my interest. It is rather the woman behind the pen name, for I consider the private person Mary Ann Evans and the persona who speaks in the novels as two separate beings. My thesis is that both deal with sexuality in different ways. This is the main reason why the scope of the essay is expanded to Eliot’s private life. Though the title of the examination reads “The expression of sexuality in George Eliot’s novels”, a whole chapter will be spend on background research about Evans’ life and her intimate relationships with men. Its aim is to show that she managed to lead a life as a desiring woman, though she lived in an age of sexual prudery. We will realise that she constructs her heroines in similar ways.

Considering the main task of the essay, I have chosen three of those female heroines: Hetty Sorrel from Adam Bede, Maggie Tulliver from The Mill on the Floss and Dorothea Brooke from Middlemarch. Their relationships to men is the thread running through the next chapter. Each woman represents a stereotype of a feminine role: the fallen woman, the not-yet fallen one and the virtuous saint. The emphasis will be put on the different representations of their sexuality. At the end it will clear

that Eliot’s novels reveal a subtly way to create “some of the most erotic novels of the Victorian period”\(^3\).

The works used for this essay are the 1998 “Oxford World’s Classic”-edition of *Adam Bede*; in the same series and the same year appeared *The Mill on the Floss*, whereas I used the “Penguin Classics” from 1994 for *Middlemarch*. To simplify the reading of the text, the abbreviations *AB, MoF* and *Mm* will be used.

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II. MARY ANN EVANS, A DESIRING WOMAN

To examine the expression of sexuality in George Eliot’s novels does involuntarily raise the question about this woman’s personal approach towards the topic. Though Mary Ann Evans herself did not talk or write upon the theme explicitly, one can nevertheless attempt to sketch her attitude due to her personal writing and behaviour.

Beforehand, it is helpful to get acquainted with Victorian moral standards of relationships between men and women. Set against this background an evaluation of Mary Ann Evans and her work will turn out more truthful.

II.a. VICTORIAN SEXUAL MORALITY

The role a woman had to enact in the Victorian period can be limited to three main aspects: housekeeper, wife and mother. This triple role bound the woman to the domestic sphere whereas the man was responsible for public affairs like business and politics.

This generalised system was especially valid for the middle class, bringing about the myth of “the angel in the house” – “a strikingly non-sexual ideal”, like a critic pointed out. The angel, itself a sexless being, has the ultimate purpose of being pure and doing good. So had the Victorian woman. Motherhood was to merge into her identity so that she finally “came to incarnate humanity’s holiest state”. Key words like purity, innocence and virtue also dominated the education of middle class girls who were expected to imitate this central image of womanhood.

Once grown-up, they were told that the natural state of adult life was marriage. It was considered as the ultimate purpose of love, though religious doctrines preached sexual desire to be only permissible when it aims at the procreation of offspring. Other principle articles of faith which dominated the relationship between men and women read as follows: virginity before marriage, unbroken monogamy, moderate

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sexual intercourse, total abstention from masturbation and adherence to taboos against sexual abominations like incest. The morality code for women was even stricter, for there existed medical specialists who claimed that "normal women are fortunately free from clamorous sexual desires." In the Victorian era, a moral woman had no right to express her sexual feelings and needs. Instead, male desire counted.

The following chapters are directed to the examination of these moral and sexual standards. On the one hand, I will ask how far the woman Mary Ann Evans echoed these ideals or not. On the other hand, I will show how she worked with them as the writer George Eliot.

II.b. EVANS' RELATIONSHIP WITH GEORGE HENRY LEWES

John Walter Cross, Evans' husband, described her former relationship with George Henry Lewes as "the most important event in George Eliot's life." In fact, this relationship (which lasted twenty-four years until Lewes' death in 1878) turns out to be a rich source for the task of grasping Evans' personal approach to sexuality.

Her union with the married writer caused a scandal in the Victorian London of those days. A contemporary, "deeply mortified and distressed" when being informed about the relationship, wondered "whether there is insanity in Miss Evans' family." This comment clearly exemplifies the significance of the step the mature thirty-five-year-old Mary Ann Evans had taken: though there existed general agreement upon the fact that Lewes righteously left his adulterous wife Agnes, Evans was branded as a fallen woman, living openly as a mistress.

But conventional standards could not force her to suppress the feelings for the man she loved. In October 1854, still at the beginning of their union, she wrote in a letter to a friend: "I am not mistaken in the person to whom I have attached myself. He is..."
worthy of the sacrifice I have incurred, and my only anxiety is that he should be rightly judged"\textsuperscript{15}.

For her devotion to Lewes, Mary Ann Evans put up with ostracism of society and estrangement with her family. Since her parents were already deceased, it was especially her brother Isaac who disapproved the liaison\textsuperscript{16}. Critics detected a fictional parallel to this brotherly separation in the relationship between Maggie Tulliver and her brother Tom in Eliot's novel \textit{MoF}. In the following chapter I will argue that there are even more such concrete parallels one can trace back to people and events in Evans' life.

For now it is crucial to note that she and Lewes never got married nor founded a family: they both decided not to have children and took precautions\textsuperscript{17}. Furthermore, the harsh laws of those days made a divorce financially impossible for Lewes\textsuperscript{18}. Years later, when Eliot had gained the reputation of a brilliant novelist and had sufficient money to petition Parliament for a divorce, she and Lewes refrained from such a step\textsuperscript{19}. One can only speculate about the motives of this decision. Surely the couple had got used to their mutual way of life, and – what counts probably even more – society also had. To obtain a public divorce would have caused yet another scandal. In consequence, also Agnes and her children would have been in the focus of a gossiping society. As it were, Evans and Lewes unselfishly supported them although he was not the father of the children\textsuperscript{20}. So the two of them were “leading no life of self-indulgence, except indeed, that being happy in each other, we find everything easy”\textsuperscript{21}, as she once put it.

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\textit{II.c. EVANS' RELATIONSHIP WITH JOHN WALTER CROSS}
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George Henry Lewes was known as the first man in Mary Ann Evans’ life. Her second and last one was John Walter Cross, a banker and family friend twenty seven years younger than herself; she finally married him at the age of sixty one in

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\textsuperscript{15} Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. \textit{The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans...}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{16} Todd, Janet (ed.). \textit{Dictionary of British Women Writers...}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 137.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. ibid., p. 427.
\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Todd, Janet (ed.). \textit{Dictionary of British Women Writers...}, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{21} Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. \textit{The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans...}, p. 97.
\end{flushright}
May 1880 after several proposals of marriage\textsuperscript{22}. The event raised another episode of scandal in her life. Cross was not only a junior to her, he was also considered as a possible latent homosexual – a rumour growing stronger after Cross’ sexual failure during their honeymoon in Venice\textsuperscript{23}.

Cross himself described their relationship in terms of “a bond of mutual dependence”\textsuperscript{24}. This comparison suggests the somehow passionless tie that connected the couple: in contrast to the union she shared with Lewes no word of “happiness” or “attachment” crossed Evans’ lips when she talked or wrote about her husband John Walter Cross. One can rather suggest that their union was of a different kind. Worship or sympathy might have been the motives for the unexpected marriage, probably friendship or habit. The speculations finally ended with Evans’ death in December 1880\textsuperscript{25}, just a few months after the spectacular marriage and two years after Lewes’ death.

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. ibid., p. 111.
\textsuperscript{24} Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans..., p. 116.
\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Todd, Janet (ed.). Dictionary of British Women Writers..., p. 217.
III. SEXUALITY IN GEORGE ELIOT’S NOVELS

To illustrate Eliot’s various ways to express sexuality it is useful to concentrate upon certain female figures who are more fully developed than their male counterparts: Hetty Sorrell, Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke. It is noteworthy that the chosen heroines are all caught in a kind of love triangle, desiring another man than the one whom they are supposed to belong to. The result is a multifold emotional and sensual dilemma in which sexuality plays a crucial part.

Since I believe that Eliot’s literary output as a woman writer reflects some of her own experiences as a desiring female, the attentive reader will easily find biographical parallels in her works.

According to the novels I wish to examine, the following chapter is divided into three sections, ordered chronologically.

III.a. ADAM BEDE (1859): ADAM – HETTY – ARTHUR

Hetty Sorrell is one of Eliot’s most ambiguous – and therefore also one of her most fascinating – woman characters. Her evaluations by critics range from “stupidly proud, vain and self-centred”\(^{26}\) to “unloved, solitary (...) alienated and isolated”\(^{27}\).

No doubt, the penniless orphan who lives with her guardians, the Poysers, is a narcissist: introduced by the author as “a distractingly pretty girl of seventeen” \((AB,\) book 1\(^{st}\), ch. VII, p. 83), she is well aware of the power she has over men. Hetty is proud of her beauty and she uses it on purpose as the classical weapon of the so called “weaker sex”. When she first meets Arthur Donnithorne, the young squire’s grandson, she is presented as a working maid in the dairy: “Hetty tossed and patted her pound of butter with quite a self-possessed, coquettish air, slyly conscious that no turn of her head was lost” \((AB,\) book 1\(^{st}\), ch. VII, p. 83). Hetty knows how to appear advantageously in the eyes of a gentleman. She just uses her body language to turn even such a trivial thing like butter-making into a sensual matter.


\(^{27}\) Almqvist Norbelie, Barbro. ‘Oppressive Narrowness’..., p. 103.
The persona clearly disapproves Hetty’s outward appearance as a “beauty like that of kittens (...) – a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you” (*AB*, book 1\textsuperscript{st}, ch. VII, p. 83 f).
Hetty has already turned the head of Arthur who soon seeks talking to her alone. It is significant that their further meetings take place in the wood, for in the midst of beeches and limes their secret is supposed to be kept well. Furthermore, the mysterious atmosphere seems to intoxicate the young lovers. Arthur is dreaming of nymphs and delicate moss that edges hollow-shaped, earthy paths (cf. *AB*, book 1\textsuperscript{st}, ch. XII, p. 130) - nature is incorporating for him the girl he desires, so he projects his sensual excitement onto the surrounding. Hetty is also caught by the anticipation of their new intimacy: it was as “if her childish soul had passed into a water-lily, resting on a liquid bed, and warmed by the midsummer sunbeams” (*AB*, book 1\textsuperscript{st}, ch. XII, p. 131). This water-lily is soon going to open itself to the new experience of a blooming state, caressed by a warming sun which is to become the centre of her small world – Arthur Donnithorne.

The author cleverly foreshadows their bodily union when the two of them have not passed the state of trembling looks yet. But it seems like an insight into their minds when she writes that

\[\ldots\] young unfurrowed souls roll to meet each other like two velvet peaches that touch softly and are at rest; they mingle as easily as two brooklets that ask for nothing but to entwine themselves and ripple with ever-interlacing curves in the leafiest hiding-places (*AB*, book 1\textsuperscript{st}, ch. XII, p. 132).

Eliot uses nature as the metaphor to describe love-making scenes that are – though discreet - clearly understood by the reader.

By the time the peaches are plucked and the innocence has vanished, Arthur has the first pangs of conscience: on the one hand, he considers himself to be foolish for loving the girl: “No gentleman, out of a ballad, could marry a farmer’s niece” (*AB*, book 1\textsuperscript{st}, ch. XIII, p. 139). He knows that people would speak ill of Hetty and her family when they were seen together. On the other hand, Hetty simply seems to be irresistible, especially when she is crying and great drops are rolling down her cheeks. Arthur – like any man – feels honoured when a woman needs him, so he feels responsible for the pet-like girl and is (at least for the moment) not willed to let her go.
It is evident that Hetty's power to manipulate men roots in her beauty. Therefore, she secretly pays homage to it by dressing like the socially superior women she wishes to become: the mirror is the central object that reflects Hetty's vanity for the readership. Her love for Arthur is based on the assumption that he wants to marry her and that he wants to make a lady of her - but Hetty is mistaken. While she lingers in a dream world of jewels and black lace scarfs, Arthur simply considers her as "a dear, affectionate, good little thing (...), so clingingly fond of him" (AB, book 1st, ch. XV, p. 153).

Hetty overestimates Arthur's feelings, whereas he is not capable to evaluate her strong hopes and emotions rightly. He does not take her sufficiently serious. Is Mrs Poyser to only one to realise her niece's character? In her opinion,

She's no better than a peacock, as 'ud strut about on the wall and spread it s tail when the sun shone if all the folks i' the parish was dying (...) It's my belief her heart's as hard as a pibble. (AB, book 1st, ch. XV, p. 156)

The very fact that Hetty commits infanticide seems to support Mrs Poyser's judgement. On the other hand, one could argue that Hetty was simply immature for the sexual intercourse with Arthur, and therefore she is also unable to cope with the consequences. To become a mother though she usually dislikes taking care of children results in a helplessness she cannot stand.

Hetty is a fallen women, and once her sin is known to the public, the Poyser-family has to face its social consequences: “Hetty had brought disgrace on them all – disgrace that could never be wiped out. That was the all-conquering feeling...” (AB, book 5th, ch. XL, p. 413). Hetty’s imprisonment and her banishment read like a morality tale that warns against the desire of the flesh; especially, since the source of the novel was commonly known: it was a real story about a woman named Mary Voce who murdered her child (cf. AB, app. 2, p. 544 ff). Once a woman lost her chastity she also lost social acceptance. Additionally, she was being condemned by the church. In Hetty’s case, it seems only natural that a low-born girl wishes to rise in society; Arthur seemed to her like the fulfilment of all her (luxury) dreams.

Adam, the rural carpenter who has set his heart on Hetty, never manages to make her adore him. Whereas Arthur appears to her like Prince Charming himself, Adam is just “something like' a man" (AB, book 1st, ch. IX, p. 97). Her affection is always dependent on materialistic values: “She thought, if Adam had been rich and could have
given her these things, she loved him well enough to marry him” (*AB*, book 1st, ch. IX, p. 99).

The citation proves that Hetty does not know what love really is. Her wishes for rank and wealth dominate any feeling of tenderness. But Adam does not realise Hetty’s rejection, he even takes her blush or her dreamy looks as signs for the love she feels for him (cf. *AB*, book 2nd, ch. XX, p. 220 f). But Hetty is always thinking of Arthur, and she does not realise the necessity to explain it to Adam. In fact, she likes flirting with him from time to time (cf. *AB*, book 3rd, ch. XXIII, p. 262). Of course Adam feels encouraged, and he even keeps on believing in Hetty’s innocent character when he has caught her and Arthur in the wood. When the affair is over, he is willing to take her as his wife - Hetty consents in it: “Adam’s attachment to her, Adam’s caress, stirred no passion in her, were no longer enough to satisfy her vanity; but they were the best her life offered her now – they promised her some change” (*AB*, book 4th, ch. XXXIV, p. 360). We know that Hetty’s plans will be shattered soon, so the marriage never takes place.


In my introduction I have divided Eliot’s heroines into the stereotypes of a saint, a fallen woman and a not-yet-fallen woman. The latter term is a revision of the Victorian figure of the fallen women and it appears to me as the appropriate expression to describe Maggie Tulliver, the miller’s daughter in *The Mill on the Floss*. In her case, Eliot put the emphasis on the temptation, the fall itself does not take place. Though at the end, in the critical eyes of society, this makes no difference at all.

To understand Maggie’s sexuality it is inevitable to examine her relationships with Philip Wakem and with Stephen Guest.

The first one is known to her since her childhood as her brother’s physically disabled school-fellow. Being a sensible girl, Maggie “had rather a tenderness for deformed things (...) and she was especially fond of petting objects that would think it very delightful to be petted by her” (*MoF*, book 2nd, ch. V, p. 177). Maggi develops a tender affection for animals or people in need, and Philip, the lawyer’s son, belongs to this

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category. One day she kisses Philip “quite earnestly” (MoF, book 2nd, ch. VI, p. 184) to convince him that she is fond of him – a childish action that binds her destiny to Philip’s. Years later, when she is seventeen years old and Philip’s a grown-up, they meet upon a hill, surrounded by trees.

Once again Eliot places such a scene in the wood. Unseen by any public eyes, she provides the figures a greater freedom to act. Philip followed Maggie to the spot to talk to her alone: their fathers pursue a lawsuit, so it would not have been tolerable to see them together. By appealing to her pity, Philip entreats Maggie to keep on meeting:

I have no friend to whom I can tell everything – no one who cares enough about me; and if I could only see you now and then, and you would let me talk to you a little, and show me that you cared for me – and that we may always be friends in heart, and help each other – then I might come to be glad of life. (MoF, book 5th, ch. I, p. 303)

Though she feels uneasy, Maggie cannot help but accepting the proposal. At this point of time, Philip realises that she does not feel any love, but rather a girlish tenderness towards him. Yet he is filled with hope that Maggie might marry him some day: “If any woman could love him, surely Maggie was that women: there was such wealth of love in her, and there was no one to claim it all” (MoF, book 5th, ch. I, p. 308).

It takes Philip some months to do so. Based on their growing confidence in each other, he finally confesses his love for her, urging Maggie to kiss him like she once did when they were children. Though Philip never uses physical violence, he nevertheless practises a psychological one. He knows how to touch Maggie’s heart, and he uses this knowledge on purpose to reach his aim. Maggie herself doubts whether she acts rightly, but at the end

Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love – like a woman’s. She had a moment of real happiness then – a moment of belief that, if there were sacrifices in this love, it was all the richer and more satisfying (MoF, book 5th, ch. 337, p. 337).

But Maggie is not true to herself, and she realises her mistake when her brother Tom finally breaks up her relationship with Philip: at this moment she feels “a certain dim background of relief” (MoF, book 5th, ch. V, p. 348). Maggie was wrong in evaluating her tender affection and loyalty towards Philip as love.
Her relationship with Stephen is based on different grounds: from the very first
sight a strong sexual attraction exists between them. He perceives her as a
mysterious “tall dark-eyed nymph” (MoF, book 6th, ch. II, p. 376) while Maggie enjoys
his admiration so that “it almost effaced her previous emotion about Philip” (MoF,
book 6th, ch. II, p. 376). In Stephen’s eyes, she is unlike other women, for she doesn’t
want to be paid compliments and she earns her own money by plain sewing. Surely it
is the unknown that fascinates Stephen: Maggie is a beautiful young woman of a
lower rank who possesses a striking self-confidence. She even wishes to learn
rowing.

From her childhood on, the river plays a crucial role in Maggie’s life. Considering her
relationship with Stephen, it will be the decisive element. Stephen teaches her to row
– an activity quite unsuitable for a lady, for it demands strength and effort. There is
also a sexual connotation visible in the rhythmic movements Maggie has to perform.
She enjoys her lesson. “Looking very bright as she stepped out of the boat (...) her
foot slipped, but happily Mr Stephen Guest held her hand, and kept her up with a firm
grip” (MoF, book 6th, ch. II, p. 382 f). This touch adds to the sensual excitement that
Maggie experiences: she gets to know emotions that she did not know from her rela-
tionship with Philip.

From this day on, “each was oppressively conscious of the other’s presence, even to
the fingerends” (MoF, book 6th, ch. VI, p. 403). One evening the two of them take a
walk together: in the garden, away from familiar walls and habits, Stephen offers
Maggie his arm. She does not refuse, and so yet another thrilling sensation develops
between them. The first climax is finally reached at a dance: during another walk,
Stephen clasps Maggie’s arm and kisses it madly. In consequence, “Maggie
snatched it from him, and glared at him like a wounded war-goddess, quivering with
rage and humiliation” (MoF, book 6th, ch. X, p. 442). She feels insulted because
Stephen dares to put her under pressure – he never behaved in this way to his
fiancée Lucy. Up to that Maggie feels as if she betrayed her cousin and Philip alike.
So she refuses Stephen’s love. Though he confesses it again and again, Maggie is
afraid of sacrificing other people’s hopes for their happiness.

Her final decision is made during a boat tour on the river. This time Maggie is
passive, letting Stephen row. She lays their destiny in his hands, and he decides to
elope with her and to get secretly married (MoF, book 6th, ch. XIII, p. 465 ff). The tide
takes them further away from home, just like their suppressed passions estrange
them from their former duties. When evening approaches they get on board of a Dutch trading vessel, “being lulled to sleep with that soft stream still flowing over her, with those delicious visions melting and fading like a wondrous aërial land of the west” (MoF, book 6th, ch. XIII, p. 470). But the next morning Maggie awakes from her world of illusions, being alarmed by a dream in which she drowns with Stephen while Lucy and Tom silently pass by.

To Maggie, the act of falling has already been done – at least outwardly. Therefore, she fears the punishment of family and society. She blames herself for being selfish, weak and hard (cf. MoF, book 6th, ch. XIV, p. 475), not permitting herself a life filled with Stephen’s love. Finally, Stephen and Maggie part in desperate anger.

The aftermath of the fall is constructed in the usual way: Tom refuses his sister, because she brought disgrace on the family, while society “hoped that she would go out of the neighbourhood – to America, or anywhere – so as to purify the air of St. Ogg’s from the taint of her presence, extremely dangerous to daughters there!” (MoF, book 7th, ch. II, p. 492). But Maggie stays, not willing to repent for a deed she did not commit. But she is punished for it by higher powers: she drowns in the flood when she tries to rescue Tom.

No doubt the story ends tragically – but it is also an ending that would have been expected in those days. Like in Hetty’s case, the readership (especially the female one) has to be warned against neglecting morality codes. Maggie is not allowed to have any chance in St. Ogg’s, though she acts as a strong woman. With regard to Eliot’s life one has to ask whether this treatment of female courage is fair. Maggie’s emotional struggle, her pangs of conscience, the fear of being refused by her brother - all these elements read like a confession by Mary Ann Evans. Indeed, critics remarked that Maggie is Eliot’s “most overtly autobiographical heroine” 29. One can only speculate whether she used Maggie’s lot to apologise or to explain herself or whether she wanted to accuse society of narrow-mindedness.

III.c. MIDDLEMARCH (1871/72): CASAUBON – DOROTHEA – WILL

The last of the three heroines I wish to examine is Dorothea Brooke, representing the stereotype of the virtuous saint. After Hetty’s fall and Maggie’s temptation, Eliot pre-

29 Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans..., 103.
sents a case of womanhood that comes close to the myth of the “angel in the house”. Dorothea is not the first figure of this kind; another representative is for example the Methodist preacher Dinah in Adam Bede. In contrast to Dorothea, she is not as fully developed and she does not provide any similar insight into a emotional and sensual struggle.

Dorothea is introduced to the readership as a modest, intelligent and young woman. Her first conversation is with her sister Celia about the jewels of their deceased mother: whereas the younger sister enjoys the variety of them, Dorothea refuses to have any of the necklaces (cf. Mm, book 1, ch. I, p.12). Critics remarked that the jewellery is to be understood to figure feminine sexuality—a hint to be taken seriously when we remember Hetty’s love for jewels. But Dorothea is neither vain nor proud, so she gives them all to Celia.

Her concept of marriage roots in the idea that “your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it” (Mm, book 1, ch. I, p. 10). At an early stage Eliot foreshadows how Dorothea’s future husband will be. It is significant that Dorothea’s notions about him are not connected to any romantic ideals like a Prince Charming, and it does not involve an expectation of passionate emotions or anything of that sort. When the fifty four year old academic Edward Casaubon steps into her life, she finds her expectations immediately fulfilled. “It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works” (Mm, book 1, ch. III, p. 29), she thinks. Obviously, Dorothea seeks a relationship on a high intellectual and spiritual level, hoping that her husband acts as her guide to experience and wisdom.

The lack of any passion or tenderness is to become the characteristic of their marriage. It begins with Casaubon’s marriage proposal via letter in which he declares in a rather rational style:

I should presumably have gone to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union (...) But I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of your youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated. (Mm, book 1, ch. III, p. 29)

So the two of them get married, which makes Dorothea so grateful that she is “throwing herself, metaphorically speaking, at Mr Casaubon’s feet, and kissing his
unfashionable shoe-ties as if he were a Protestant Pope” (Mm, book 1, ch. V, p. 51). This stereotype of the submissive wife corresponds to the patriarchal ideal of superiority and domination.

As early as during their honeymoon (in fact Casaubon’s study tour to Rome), Dorothea’s bridal life turns out to be quite different from what she hoped – but it takes her months to finally admit that she was mistaken in her husband. The matter becomes evident when the couple argues once again because of Will Ladislaw, a relative of Casaubon whom he disapproves. Dorothea reacts “with a dumb inward cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread” (Mm, book 4, ch. XXXVII, p. 375). Instead of supporting his wife’s intellectual development, Casaubon hinders it by only pursuing his chief aim to finish his work Key to all Mythologies. Significantly, it comes to nothing. The estrangement grows until Casaubon’s death puts an end to the unsuccessful marriage. The fact that Eliot does not attempt to create moments of eroticism or tenderness between the couple strongly suggests that Casaubon left Dorothea a virginal wife, still innocent and pure as before the marriage.

The name of Will Ladislaw has already been mentioned above: he is the one to follow Casaubon. Though in their first meeting, he thinks of Dorothea as an unpleasant, passionless girl, because she is going to marry his cousin (cf. Mm, book 1, ch. IX, p. 80). By then, it is just her voice that pleases him – but when he meets her again in Rome, he changes his mind. He finds her “not disagreeable (…), but adorably simple and full of feeling. She was an angel beguiled” (Mm, book 2, ch. XXI, p. 209). She finds in Will a person she can talk to while her husband does not seem to understand her. Since he objects to his visits, Will soon stops them, but once the couple returns to England, he comes to meet Dorothea again. During that meeting

Each looked at the other as if they had been two flowers which had opened then and there. Dorothea for the moment forgot her husband’s mysterious irritation against Will: it seemed fresh water at her thirsty lips to speak without fear to the one person whom she had found receptive… . (Mm, book 4, ch. XXXVII, p. 363)

It is noteworthy that it is not physical attraction that builds the basis of their relationship, it is rather a growing emotional intimacy. They both enjoy getting to know each

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other more closely. Dorothea does not know that in the meantime Casaubon develops a jealousy that even makes him change his last will in which he suspects Will as a marriage impostor who seeks Dorothea's fortune (cf. *Mm*, book 4, ch. XLII, p. 421). In fact, Will feels an admiration for Dorothea that Casaubon is unable to perform: "Dorothea, he said to himself, was for ever enthroned in his soul: no other woman could sit higher than her footstool" (*Mm*, book 5, ch. XLVII, p. 469). Once again Eliot underlines the strong spiritual connection that underlies Will’s and Dorothea’s relationship. Interestingly, their meetings always take place in libraries or other enclosed rooms, and it is not until Casaubon’s death that Dorothea admits to herself any other feeling for Will than friendship. But when she is being told her husband’s suspicion about him, she feels “a strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw” (*Mm*, book 5, ch. L, p. 491). Her world starts to change, and so does her perception of it. The thought of Will being her lover has not entered her pure mind before, but from then on, her soul starts to seek his attendance more and more.

Though Will is aware of his love for her, he finally leaves to pursue a political career that enables him to return as a worthy husband. When he takes leave of Dorothea, a misunderstanding arises that keeps the two further apart: no one of them is able to express their emotions, supposing just friendship on the other’s side. Will’s emotional outbreak only irritates Dorothea:

> It seemed to him as if they were like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other’s presence, while their hearts were conscious and their eyes were yearning. But there was no help for it. (*Mm*, book VI, ch. LIV, p. 543)

A visitor suddenly puts an end to their meeting. It takes Dorothea some time and jealousy to realise how much she loves Will. In a bedroom scene (cf. *Mm*, book VIII, ch. LXXX, p. 786) she is presented as the stereotyped suffering, sobbing woman who cries for her lover, the centre of her world. It is the first time that Dorothea suffers so strongly from an emotional disappointment. When they meet again after Will’s early return, they are both determined to be true to themselves and to their feelings. Yet it is nature that paves the way for them, for a storm is coming up: the storm clearly signifies the unrestrained passion that is also going to break out between them.

> Leaves and little branches were hurled about, and the thunder was getting nearer. The light was more and more sombre, but there came a flash of lightning which made them start and look at each other, and then smile (*Mm*, book VIII, ch. LXXXIV, p. 809).
Dashing rain follows their first trembling kiss, and until the dark clouds vanish from the sky, they decide to marry each other. Dorothea has always acted due to the morality code of society, so Eliot rewards her with a happy marriage and children.
Hetty Sorrel, Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke – though they are all different figures from different social classes, they have at least one thing in common: they are desiring women in a patriarchal society. The scope ranges from the comparatively explicit sexuality of the dairy maid to the spiritual aspirations of a saintly character.

The expression of their sexuality is mainly based upon the use of metaphors. Eliot emphasises the meaning of nature for her purpose: in the midst of untamed and genuine nature, the protagonists are not bound to any social codes of behaviour. In a protective thicket or on a running river they can act according to their true emotions without being afraid to be detected by suspicious eyes. Though Eliot does avoid clear erotic descriptions, a sensitive reader is well aware of her subtle techniques to suggest them. Even objects like jewels or oars incorporate hidden meanings about the owner’s attitude to sexuality. And it is also body language that counts: the conscious turning of a head or the working hands reveal as much as a blush or trembling lips do. It is obvious that Eliot uses a wide range of devices to create an erotic sensibility.

Compared to the author’s biography, the restrictions and punishments that Eliot’s heroines have to bear seem at first unfair. In her lifetime, a phrenologist stated that she had a dominant intellect, her moral feelings being balanced with her sexual feelings and needs\(^3\). Indeed Evans performed her feminine duty to do good, but her union with Lewes hindered her from reaching the state of ideal womanhood: she did not became a mother, and it was not until near the close of her life that she became a wife. In fact, she even betrayed this image by living as an unmarried wife. Nevertheless she achieved a success whereas she even denies her fallen protagonists a future. Since they are weak, they have to be sacrificed to moral values. In consequence, they are excluded from family, church and society alike, for they did not behave according to the rules. Interestingly, the male protagonists do not have to suffer similar pains: though men like Arthur Donnithorne or Stephen Guest also fall, they survive, get over their pangs of conscience and live happily ever after. It seems women were the only ones to pay a high price for their desire.

I have already speculated in an earlier chapter why Eliot satisfied the expectations of her Victorian readership. Is it pure sales strategy or can it be understood as an accu-

\(^3\) Cf. Karl, Frederick. *George Eliot...*, p. 70.
sation? Does she seriously wish to warn her young female readers or does she want to prove them that real life can cross the boundaries in fiction?

The question can hardly be answered. First it has to be underlined that Eliot was an exceptional woman. Her decision to live openly with a married man was surely a burden only few women could stand – especially, since the couple led a life in which the public was keenly interested in. In her work, she managed to overcome the censorship of those days by developing a decent vocabulary that could bring about subtle erotic passages. She did not deny her heroines the desires she experienced herself. And yet they have to suffer, they have to struggle and they have to fail.

I think that Eliot provides an own explanation in chapter XVII in *Adam Bede*. There she declares: “And I would not, even I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this (...) So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things better than they were” (*AB*, book 2nd, ch. XVII, p. 176). It seems that this statement is Eliot’s credo: she places her stories in a realistic context, so her heroines have to bear realistic consequences for their misbehaviour.

Nevertheless I will argue that this method should not be understood as a discouragement. As long as the reader knew the woman behind the pen name, as long as she or he knew her story, Eliot herself acted as the possible exception of the rule. For the famous writer Henry James, George Eliot’s merit is clearly defined: “... he stresses the extent to which she had helped on the cause of feminism by showing in the dedication of her life that there was nothing that was closed to women”32.

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Primary


Secondary


