

The Light-Haired Lady: The Role of Lucy's Sympathy in *The Mill on the Floss*

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"[. . .] a woman who was loving and thoughtful of other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them."

— George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (370)

<1>George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is about the moral growth of a woman, and explicitly highlights the ways in which gender inflects the options available to her. *The Mill on the Floss* celebrates Maggie Tulliver's capacity for sympathy, while also showing, and lamenting, that this sympathy often clashes with the normative code of society, a code that deals with women in particularly harsh ways. George Eliot's interest in how femininity is constructed along with sympathy informs not only her characterization of Maggie, but of all the female characters in the novel. That is, she shows how expectations that women behave sympathetically construct and determine their identities and range of action. In particular, Maggie's cousin Lucy Deane seems to represent conventional femininity. With Lucy, George Eliot explores the tensions inherent in Victorian femininity. Lucy is a peripheral character: her appearances in the novel are relatively few and her interiority and perspective seldom come into the novel. Her presence in the novel highlights George Eliot's discomfort with the ideology of femininity, specifically, with the ways in which this ideology limits the possibilities open to women for autonomous ethical action. Lucy's embodiment of normative femininity complicates George Eliot's critique of the binary system of gender. With Lucy, George Eliot shows the multiple ways in which gender, sex, and sympathy can produce each other, and the implications of their mutual imbrication.

<2>*The Mill on the Floss* also elaborates on the problem of economic understandings of sympathy. It shows how completely at odds such understandings are with sympathetic ethics, and how, indeed, they threaten to undermine such ethics. Rachel Ablow (2007) points out this problem, suggesting that the dynamic that governs Maggie's relationships with Philip and Lucy is essentially economic, in that it involves a calculation whereby Maggie "compare[s] her happiness with theirs [Philip's and Lucy's] and so imagine[s] trading the one for the other" (87). The novel as a whole does not endorse this calculating compassion and, as Ablow points out,

“this economic perspective is replaced by an ethical one grounded in a consciousness of the causal relationship between herself [Maggie] and others” (87). I agree with Ablow here, and take up her argument that *The Mill on the Floss* concerns itself with the difference between economic and ethical models of sympathy, but I explore it from the perspective of peripheral characters, who already bear a fraught relationship to the novel’s own economy of sympathy, and who illustrate the desirability of sympathetic ethics.

<3>Like *Middlemarch* (1871-2) albeit to a lesser extent, *The Mill on the Floss* is the story of, among other things, a community. While Maggie’s story remains central, the novel is also concerned with the relationships and events that both bind and divide her community. As a result, the novel includes a significant number of peripheral characters, from Lucy Deane to the Wakems to the Dodson aunts, among others. In this article’s analysis of femininity and sympathy, I shall focus primarily on Lucy Deane, because her marginalization is most closely linked to the marginalization of femininity that remains a central concern in George Eliot’s novels. Lucy Deane seems, like Hetty Sorrel, to embody stereotypical femininity, and, while this does serve to marginalize her, her femininity, unlike Hetty’s, is not painted in negative terms, as it is associated with gentleness rather than with vanity. Lucy, in terms of the plot, is more marginal in *The Mill on the Floss* than is Hetty in *Adam Bede*, but she emerges as a much more sympathetic character, albeit one who is associated with femininity in ways that often seem to trivialize her. Reading George Eliot’s major works chronologically suggests that she came more and more to sympathize with the conventionally feminine—and conventionally beautiful—woman, culminating in her complex sympathy for *Daniel Deronda*’s memorable Gwendolen Harleth, which contrasts with her marked lack of sympathy for *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond.⁽¹⁾ In *The Mill on the Floss*, I suggest, George Eliot has more sympathy with normative femininity than in *Adam Bede* (1859), but still associates femininity with peripheral characters in sometimes troubling ways.

<4>Lucy Deane embodies not only conventional femininity, but also, and more importantly, George Eliot’s ambivalence toward that femininity.⁽²⁾ On the one hand, the narrator often adopts a condescending tone toward Lucy, dismissing her primarily on the grounds of her difference from Maggie, a difference that rests primarily on the former’s seemingly easy embodiment of femininity, which contrasts with Maggie’s rebellion against the conventions that cannot contain her.⁽³⁾ On the other, Lucy has many admirable qualities, including gentleness and, most importantly, sympathy, which George Eliot valued highly. Her sympathy, though, differs from Maggie’s, suggesting the capaciousness of sympathetic ethics. Lucy’s femininity, however, seems to detract from these qualities, in making them appear reflexive, rather than considered. In this way she has much in common with Seth in *Adam Bede*. At the same time, despite Lucy’s apparently easy embodiment of conventional femininity, her sympathy for Maggie sets her apart from other female characters in the community, and contrasts sharply with the harsh judgments of the “world’s wife” (491).⁽⁴⁾ It seems that, with Lucy, George Eliot struggles to dissociate sympathy from femininity, but nevertheless acknowledges the strength and value of sympathy, even when it is so closely linked to normative and oppressive gender ideologies. In other words, the system of gender seems to work for Lucy in ethically productive ways, but, as the novel as a whole shows, the problem with this system is that it does not work uniformly, as in the case of Maggie. George Eliot’s tentative solution to this problem seems to be to unhinge sympathy from gender; however, the problem with this in relation to *The Mill on*

the Floss is that it involves a certain denial of sympathy, from both Maggie and the narrator, to Lucy as a character, rather than exclusively to what she represents.

<5>The narrative highlights Lucy's insignificance (relative to Maggie) by having Lucy herself emphasize it. Lucy refers to herself as "a little insignificant thing" (371), and uses this evaluation of herself to justify Stephen's sisters' initial coldness toward her. She also explicitly devalues herself in relation to Maggie, saying to her that, unlike Maggie, "[n]ow, if I were to put anything shabby on, I should be quite unnoticeable—I should be a mere rag" (372). Despite Lucy's manifest advantages of beauty and socioeconomic position, she participates in her marginalization within the narrative. One should perhaps not take this to mean, however, that George Eliot casts Lucy as "a mere rag." To do so would be to, at least partially, accept this valuation of her as such, and this kind of objectification runs counter to George Eliot's insistence on understanding the subjectivity of other people. Perhaps, then, this is a critique of both class and gender. The text as a whole clearly does not endorse the snobbery of Stephen's sisters, and their coldness toward Lucy tells more about the arbitrary cruelty of the class system than it does about Lucy.

<6>Criticism of *The Mill on the Floss* has given but scant attention to Lucy, thereby producing and reinforcing her marginal status in relation to the novel as a whole. Most critical mentions of Lucy consist only in identifying her with George Eliot's sister Chrissey,⁽⁵⁾ although some have suggested her cousin Bessie Garner as a more likely source.⁽⁶⁾ Some critics, mentioning her in passing, are dismissive of Lucy Deane. A select few read Lucy Deane more positively, even subversively, and it is within this tradition that I position myself. In *A Woman's Portion: Ideology, Culture, and the British Female Novel Tradition* (1988), for example, Linda C. Hunt observes that, while George Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss*, is concerned with the shaping of femininity, she "is not particularly interested in Maggie's cousin Lucy, in whom gentleness and compassion seem genuinely inherent" (143).⁽⁷⁾ While these arguments are highly suggestive, they are not, unfortunately, pursued in any depth or detail, and I seek to remedy this in my discussion of Lucy.

<7>Whereas Maggie chafes against conventional femininity, Lucy seems to unproblematically embody her culture's vision of the ideal girl and, later, woman. Because of this, she seems to be aligned with the cultural apparatus that oppresses Maggie, even though Lucy herself remains throughout the novel highly sympathetic to her rebellious cousin. When critics of the novel mention Lucy at all, it is generally to note that she embodies normative femininity. The characteristics of normative Victorian femininity she performs include docility, gentleness, and unthreatening attractiveness (unthreatening because it never threatens to exceed the bounds of propriety). Rod Edmond (1988) includes Lucy in his list of characters who are representations of "the conventional middle-class young lady," and compares her to Laura in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* as similarly "blond, pliant and conventionally feminine" (107). Similarly, Lloyd Fernando (1977) describes Lucy as "society's own ideal well-brought-up woman" (34). The problem in identifying Lucy with conventional femininity is that it has tended to include a tacit condemnation of that femininity. This condemnation fails to recognize the ways in which George Eliot allows conventional femininity to be associated with certain highly positive values, primarily sympathy, even while she criticizes the gender ideology that makes femininity

compulsory for women. Rather than dismissing femininity because it fails for Maggie, George Eliot makes some moves toward recuperating that which it has to offer in the characterization of Lucy.

<8>Lucy's childhood blondness and docility contrast with Maggie's unruly dark hair and rebelliousness. Whereas both Maggie's hair and her character refuse to be contained, everything about Lucy is neat and manageable, and thus does not symbolically threaten to disrupt either the social order in general or the bounds of femininity in particular. The narrator remarks, for example, on Lucy's "natty completeness" (61) and has Lucy "put up the neatest little rosebud mouth to be kissed: everything about her was neat" (61). Lucy, then, unlike Maggie, conforms to the expectations of conventional femininity. Because this is associated with her "neat[ness]" and "completeness," George Eliot draws attention to the ways in which conventional femininity works to contain, and thereby control, female sexuality. Similarly, Mrs Tulliver observes that Lucy participates in her own containment and physical control: "'there's Lucy Deane's such a good child—you may set her on a stool, and there she'll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off'" (43). Lucy, then, is not simply feminine and conventional to highlight Maggie's difference, but, also, to offer an illustration of the particular ways in which gender ideology works: that is, by emphasizing containment and control.

<9>Stephen's choice of Lucy as a potential wife is based on obviously shallow criteria,⁽⁸⁾ but this seems to reflect more on the patriarchal construction of ideal femininity than on Stephen's personal failings. This is particularly clear if one notes the resonances between Stephen's imaginings about Lucy and Adam Bede's misreading of Hetty's beauty. Adam misinterprets Hetty's childlike beauty as a sign of inner goodness—most ominously so in his reflection that she will be a doting mother.⁽⁹⁾ Stephen, similarly, judges Lucy's superficial qualities as proof that she will make an amiable wife. In some ways, this is as much a misreading as Adam's delusions about Hetty: Stephen's passionate attraction to, and pursuit of, Maggie suggests that Lucy does not have all the qualities he seeks in a wife. In other ways, however, it is a relatively fair reading: Lucy is indeed as amiable as her appearance suggests, and her gentleness and kindness, not to mention sympathy, are qualities that George Eliot constructs as crucial not only in women but, more particularly, in wives (as the failures of sympathy in Mr and Mrs Tulliver's marriage make all too clear). In allowing Lucy to embody the very qualities that Hetty so tragically lacked, George Eliot is moving, in *The Mill on the Floss*, toward a reconciliation of femininity with sympathy.

<10>Stephen's "choice" of Lucy parallels Mr Tulliver's choice of his wife from among the Dodson sisters, in that he chooses first that he will marry one of them, and only selects Bessy after this decision, just as Stephen chooses Lucy as an avatar of the kind of woman upon whom he has already settled. Mr. Tulliver explains to Mr Riley: "'I picked the mother because she wasn't o'er'cute—bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing; but I picked her from her sisters o' purpose, 'cause she was a bit weak, like'" (19). Mr Tulliver, in other words, wanted an attractive wife who would be useful to him, rather than an equal or companion. While he may be more blunt than Stephen about his motivations, the similarity is in the belief that there is little to differentiate one woman from another. This does not mean, however, that George Eliot endorses a reading of either Mrs Tulliver or Lucy as lacking

individuality, but, rather, that they become exemplars of a particularly patriarchal view of women as fungible. While this view is clearly problematic on a number of levels and for many reasons, perhaps the most pressing of these is that it impedes marital sympathy.

<11>Their status as default courtship choice is by no means the only link between Lucy and her Aunt Tulliver: the novel emphasizes their superficial similarities. The latter woman feels a kinship to the former because of their physical similarity. She tells her husband, of Lucy: “I can’t help loving the child as if she was my own; and I’m sure she’s more like *my* child than sister Deane’s, for she’d allays a very poor colour for one of our family, sister Deane had” (43). Despite their superficial resemblance in looks and placidity, however, Lucy is by no means a copy of Mrs Tulliver. Whereas Mrs Tulliver’s lack of intelligence is stressed (especially by Mr Tulliver), Lucy is, although not intellectual like Maggie, much more quick-witted than her aunt. This emerges in the scenes of flirtation between herself and Stephen Guest, in her skill in accomplishments, which are the only channels open to her, like most middle-class Victorian women, to express creativity,(10) and even, albeit weakly, in Stephen’s assessment of her as “not stupid” (370). For this reason, it is important to address Lucy (and Mrs Tulliver) as individuals rather than as embodiments of normative femininity, even if each of them does conform to many aspects of the stereotype. It is, perhaps, the very capaciousness of the stereotype that makes it so pervasive.

<12>Lucy’s femininity is associated with her sympathy. George Eliot seems skeptical of the sort of reflexive sympathy that the Victorians associated with middle-class femininity.(11) She seems anxious to dissociate sympathy from femininity, a move that sometimes, as in her characterization of Lucy, marginalizes femininity itself. Because George Eliot defends sympathy in part by separating it from femininity, she participates in devaluing the feminine. This is problematic, of course, to feminist critics and readers, but makes sense within the context of George Eliot’s particular brand of cautious proto-feminism. As Kathryn Hughes stresses in her excellent biography *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (1999), George Eliot did not espouse radical or revolutionary change. Rather, she was interested in how an expanded ethical vision could enrich lives even in the midst of constraining social circumstances. So, while today’s reader might not approve of George Eliot’s ambivalence about disentangling gender and sympathy, it is not at odds within the context of both the historical period and the author’s own philosophy.

<13>One of the central problems raised by Lucy, then, is how to reconcile an ethics of sympathy with a gendered understanding of ethics and emotions. To deny the culturally-coded affinity between femininity and sympathy is problematic, because it threatens a rejection of the feminine. Yet allowing this affinity to remain unchallenged not only solidifies the binary system of gender but, also, weakens George Eliot’s claims for sympathy as the best basis for a universally-available ethics. Peripheral characters including Lucy highlight this tension, by showing both the ways in which femininity can nurture sympathy, and the ways in which sympathy can allow individuals to exceed their own gendered positions without rejecting them. Sympathy and gender might be read as mutually-supporting discourses, in which case both threaten to become tools of dominant ideologies, just as Mary Poovey (1988) argues that gender ideology supported Victorian class and economic ideologies. Conversely, though, they might

also be read as existing in a relationship of tension that constantly generates possibilities and forces a re-thinking of both terms. In this light, it is precisely because the imbrication of gender and sympathy is so fraught that it becomes a flexible and evolving ground for a living ethics that cannot be contained within systems or ideologies but, rather, makes ideologies part of the ground on which it works and grows. Thus, peripheral characters, Lucy among them, become testing grounds for some of the possibilities, and dangers, of linking gender with sympathy.

<14>Much provocative research has been done on the way in which *The Mill on the Floss* engages with the trope of the dark and fair ladies, and it seems imperative to read the character of Lucy at least partially in relation to this trope, which is used to figure what Sharon Marcus (2007) has described as the “structural antagonism” (81) between Maggie and Lucy.⁽¹²⁾ At the same time, and as Marcus herself notes, George Eliot does more with their pairing than simply use it to structure the novel.⁽¹³⁾ Rod Edmond mentions them in his discussion of the pattern in a number of Victorian novels in which female characters are paired, one being “active and ‘masculine’, the other passive and ‘feminine,’” and notes that, “[a]lmost invariably the active woman is dark and the passive one fair” (107). With reference to this trope, and how George Eliot invokes Scott to enforce its relevance in reading Lucy and Maggie, Deborah Epstein Nord (2006) describes Lucy, rather simplistically, as “Maggie’s own blond-haired nemesis” (104). While George Eliot clearly invokes this trope in her portrayal of Maggie and Lucy, it is, I suggest, problematic to insist that this leaves nothing more to be said about the pairing of the two women. Rather, George Eliot subverts this pairing in ways that insist, without resolving, on the persistence of gender tensions in narrative sympathies. By drawing attention to the trope itself, George Eliot sheds light on the uneven distribution of sympathy, especially sympathy for women, and how normative visions of femininity inflect this distribution.

<15>The economic model of sympathy, which Maggie’s initial reaction to the fate of dark women invokes,⁽¹⁴⁾ is also at play in the townspeople’s sympathy for Lucy. Their sympathy for Lucy takes the form of hardness toward Maggie. For example, “Mr Glegg, whose kindness, flowing entirely into compassion for Lucy, made him as hard in his judgment of Maggie as Mr Deane himself” (499). Interestingly, this articulation of a certain model of sympathy appears in the novel focused through more to less narratively marginalized characters: Mr Glegg—Lucy—Maggie. Here, George Eliot shows herself to be aware of the flawed logic by which sympathy for one person transformed into coldness or cruelty to another. One could, of course, censure George Eliot for, like the townspeople, focusing all of her sympathy on one person—Maggie, in her case. However, by mentioning the townspeople’s sympathy for Lucy, George Eliot is not criticizing this sympathy but, rather, the form that it takes. Her point is not that one ought to be sympathetic to Maggie rather than Lucy, for this would be simply to reverse the model adopted by the townspeople, in which sympathy for one person manifests as condemnation for another. Rather, George Eliot is criticizing this model of sympathy, and not just its objects in this particular case. In theory, then, if not always in practice (i.e., in the treatment of minor characters), George Eliot rejects the scarcity paradigm in favor of a more generous and diffuse brand of sympathy.

<16>The narrative is not without sympathy for Lucy, but this is tempered in a number of ways, one of which is the downplaying of her attachment to Stephen. This is comic at first, as when

Lucy, without irony, tells Maggie that she prefers not to be engaged, as being engaged is so close to marriage: “I would rather not be engaged. When people are engaged, they begin to think of being married soon” (371). This contrasts sharply with Maggie and Stephen’s intense passion for each other, illustrated, for example, when he impulsively kisses her arm (442),(15) as does Stephen’s lukewarm, rationalized affection for Lucy. However, the narrative suggests that, while it may be more charged than Stephen and Lucy’s, Maggie and Stephen’s relationship is, if not equally shallow, certainly incomplete in its own ways. Maggie makes this clear when she tells Stephen that she has not given herself to him completely, and cannot, because to do so would sunder the part of herself that is firmly rooted in the past and in her family and communal relationships.(16) While many critics have noted this lack in Maggie and Stephen’s potential relationship,(17) this has not, to my knowledge, been juxtaposed with the weaknesses in Stephen and Lucy’s relationship. This acknowledgement is important, I would suggest, in understanding both how Lucy functions in George Eliot’s attempt to show a multitude of human relations, and in how one might mitigate—how, perhaps, George Eliot encourages one to mitigate—her marginalization vis à vis Maggie in particular and the novel in general.

<17>Lucy’s ignorance of Maggie and Stephen’s growing attraction is pathetic in both senses of the word. It is, of course, tragic in its consequences, but it is also pathetic in the sense that it highlights Lucy’s lack of perception. When Stephen meets Maggie, for example, he

was so fascinated by this clear, large gaze [Maggie’s], that at last he forgot to look away from it occasionally towards Lucy; but she, sweet child, was only rejoicing that Stephen was proving to Maggie how clever he was, and that they would certainly be good friends after all. (381)

Here, Lucy is a “sweet child”—her innocence infantilizes her, and thus becomes not a mark of virtue but of ignorance. It also affects the ways in which the novel promotes and denies sympathy with her. If Lucy is a child, it is easy enough for the narrator to pity her—but not so easy to sympathize with her, as that implies an acknowledgment of commonality and respect for subjectivity. Lucy’s ignorance of Maggie and Stephen’s growing mutual attraction is thus doubly coded in what it suggests about Lucy’s character. On the one hand, it can be read as suggesting that Lucy is neither worthy of Stephen nor overly attached to him. On the other, it can be read as illustrating her tragic innocence and idealism. In either case, it seems clear that Lucy’s idealized femininity must be associated with the sort of sympathy that is morally admirable, in that it sees the good in people, but also pragmatically flawed, because it does not assist her in navigating the realities of adult relationships. This doubleness thus emerges as a subtle condemnation of the disjunction between the social expectations of female behaviour and the usefulness of such behaviour.

<18>This disjunction returns to George Eliot’s ambivalence about the relationship between gender, especially femininity, and sympathy, and about the ethical value of this relationship. As Ablow suggests, the Victorians connected sympathy with gender, making it an attribute of idealized femininity and the role of the wife. This feminization and privatization of sympathy seems to undercut its potential as an ethical force for determining social relationships that extend beyond the nuclear family. However, George Eliot, while attuned to this danger, ultimately sees

sympathy as having a much wider potential, even if its operations are most obvious in relationships between individuals. The feminization of sympathy seems to threaten its ethical viability, but does not necessarily do so, if sympathy is understood as a force that cannot be contained by normative ideologies such as the binary gender system. Sympathy works not only within the gender system, but, also, through and beyond it. As George Eliot depicts it, sympathy resists containment and subverts the very system that seems to produce it.

<19>Lucy Deane, like Seth Bede, is associated with gentleness, exhibiting considerable sympathy in situations both major and minor. One of her minor sympathies is exemplified in her kindness to animals, as illustrated in her treatment of her dog, Minny, and horse, Sindbad. Lucy “always fed [Sindbad] with her own hand” (370). This is not celebrated, however, but treated with condescension, even contempt. The narrator observes that Lucy

was fond of feeding dependent creatures, and knew the private tastes of all the animals about the house, delighting in the little rippling sounds of her canaries when their beaks were busy with fresh seed, and in the small nibbling pleasures of certain animals which, lest she should appear too trivial, I will here call ‘the more familiar rodents.’ (370)

While this description does trivialize Lucy, it also represents a marked shift in George Eliot’s attitude toward conventional femininity, and aligns Lucy with the more central Maggie, who has earlier been depicted as caring for deformed lambs. Lucy’s delight in caring for animals—however trivial—contrasts with *Adam Bede*’s Hetty’s distaste for children.

<20>The major situation in which Lucy’s sympathies are called forth is in her response to Maggie’s near-elopement with Stephen. Despite the places in which the novel shows Lucy’s sympathy, it does not fully celebrate her sympathy in this instance, even though her ability to sympathize and forgive here are certainly noteworthy. Lucy makes a special effort to see Maggie as soon as she is able: “‘I stole out,’ said Lucy, almost in a whisper, while she sat down close to Maggie and held her hand, ‘when papa and the rest were away’” (507). Unlike Tom and the majority of the community, Lucy does not condemn Maggie—despite having more right than anybody, even, arguably, Philip, to do so. Rather, she recognizes Maggie’s own distress and responds to it with spontaneous and genuine sympathy. Lucy tells Maggie, comforting the latter rather than focusing on her own injury, “‘I know you never meant to make me unhappy. . . . It is a trouble that has come on us all;--you have more to bear than I have—and you gave him up, when. . . . you did what it must have been very hard to do’” (510). Maggie tells Lucy that she hopes never to cause her sorrow again, to which Lucy replies, rather cryptically, “‘in a low voice, that had the solemnity of confession in it, ‘you are better than I am. I can’t. . . .’” (510), at which point, “[s]he broke off there, and said no more. But they clasped each other again in a last embrace” (511). Thus they part, and the novel provides no further clues as to how to interpret Lucy’s unfinished sentence. Does it suggest that she is, despite her kindness, unable to forgive Maggie? Because Lucy is a peripheral character, it is not unreasonable that this question is never satisfactorily answered. Therefore, George Eliot leaves this moment open to interpretation, suggesting the need to rethink a simplistic equating of sympathy with feminine gentleness such as Lucy’s, as well as consider whether it is, in fact, necessary for Lucy to forgive Maggie wholeheartedly, in that, even though she may not, this does not prevent their reconciliation.(18)

<21>This scene of reconciliation reveals many of the novel's tensions about the importance of women's sympathy, and of the related anxieties surrounding the equation of sympathy with femininity. Sharon Marcus has argued that this scene is pivotal: "[t]hough Maggie resents Lucy and injures her by falling in love with Stephen, the plot is almost as driven to reunite Maggie with her estranged female cousin as it is to return her to the alienated brother with whom she ultimately drowns" (81). While provocative, this argument ignores the fact that the reconciliation of Maggie and Lucy is subordinated not only to the reconciliation of Maggie and Tom, but, also, to that of Maggie and Philip, in being sandwiched between the two events. Philip, furthermore, is given considerably more voice than Lucy—his final letter to Maggie fully articulates his feelings for her and his understanding of her situation. Lucy, in contrast, can only meet with Maggie briefly, and this meeting consists primarily in Maggie unburdening herself to Lucy. This, however, can be read as a prime illustration of Lucy's sympathy: she recognizes Maggie's own need to confide, to apologize, and to express herself, and allows her to do so during their brief meeting. Much of their communication during this meeting is tacit, consisting more in tears and embraces than in words. While Maggie responds to Philip's letter with tears as well, the letter allows Philip to (re)establish his sense of self in relation to Maggie. Lucy, in contrast, listens to Maggie and cries *with* her. The reconciliation of the two women is thus not a scene in which Lucy re-imagines herself, but one in which she allows Maggie the catharsis of apology and mutual tears.⁽¹⁹⁾ Lucy's sympathy, then, acts in many ways by effacing her self—a sort of renunciation that George Eliot celebrates in Maggie's more dramatic acts of sacrifice.

<22>Lucy's sympathy for Maggie, rather than Maggie's for Lucy, is the ground of their relationship. When Lucy learns of Maggie's complicated relationship with Philip, she responds with a double sympathy—double in that it is both active and passive. It is active when Lucy mobilizes sympathy in her efforts to overcome the barriers to Philip and Maggie's relationship. She tells Maggie: "I shall puzzle my small brain to contrive some plot that will bring everybody into the right mind, so that you may marry Philip" (388), and, also, offers to take the blame for Maggie's seeing Philip: "I'll take the responsibility, then—tell him [Tom] it was my fault" (386). Lucy's more passive sympathy also emerges in her offering herself up as Maggie's confidante: "Maggie, you have secrets from me, and I have none from you" (387). Maggie finds immense relief in unburdening herself to Lucy: "Maggie had never before known the relief of such an outpouring: she had never before told Lucy anything of her inmost life; and the sweet face bent towards her with sympathetic interest, and the little hand pressing hers, encouraged her to speak on" (387). Here, Lucy shows Maggie the loving sympathy that the latter has craved all her life, and of which she has found so little. Yet it proves inadequate, for Maggie is so invested in the patriarchal community that rejects her that it is primarily the sympathy of men (Tom, her father, Philip, and Stephen) that she seeks. Lucy's sympathy, in this context, becomes devalued because of her gender, even while, as previously discussed, her femininity may contribute to her sympathy. One danger, then, of associating sympathy as a reflexive component of femininity, is that, given the patriarchal devaluation of femininity, such sympathy might lose some of its ethical force to work in the world. The very fact of Lucy's peripheral status, and that of her sympathy, makes this clear.

<23>In attending to the characterization and treatment of Lucy Deane, one can better understand George Eliot's evolving understanding of the relationship between gender and femininity. Because of her peripheral and underdeveloped status within the novel, Lucy remains a figure that

can sustain the conflicted relationship between femininity and sympathy. Lucy seems to be both unproblematically sympathetic and contented with her participation in normative femininity. Were she to be a more fully developed character, or occupy more narrative space, it is quite possible that tensions would emerge in her enactment of both femininity and sympathy. Because she is not, however, she allows the author to explore the possibility of harmony between patriarchal gender ideology and an ethics of sympathy, even while a main thrust of the novel is to show the ways in which patriarchy punishes both sympathy and rebellions against normative femininity.

Endnotes

(1)Stefanie Markovits (2006) suggests that “Eliot’s sympathies, otherwise so diffusive, discovered their limits” in her characterization of Rosamond (106).(^)

(2)Graver (1984) has discussed George Eliot’s criticism of conventional femininity, arguing that, in *The Mill on the Floss*, “George Eliot works to expose a certain superficial refinement exhibited by some women—including, doubtless, some of her female readers—by uncovering the vulgarity and hardness it conceals” (283).(^)

(3)Ashton observes, of the scene in which Stephen Guest is introduced, “the cynical, playful narrative voice jars rather. Stephen and Lucy are both treated derisively, Lucy being rather too obviously set up as the sweet, insipid little thing against whom Maggie will shine (as Philip says, the dark passionate heroine upstaging the pale fair one)” (67).(^)

(4)Of the community’s response to Maggie’s (apparent) transgression with Stephen, George Eliot writes: “the world’s wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver’s conduct had been of the most aggravated kind” (491). She describes the townswomen’s lack of sympathy: “it was only to be hoped she [Maggie] would repent, and that God would have mercy on her: He had not the care of Society on His hands—as the world’s wife had” (492).(^)

(5)Barbara Hardy (2006) summarizes this trend, noting that “Chrissey is sometimes linked with Lucy Deane through the blonde hair, neat clothes and tidy habits which George Eliot described to Cross and which make the contrast between the girls in *The Mill*” (12), but adds, “grown-up Lucy has mind, talents and wit which seem more like Fanny’s than Chrissey’s, though we don’t know if she is like either” (12).(^)

(6) Gordon S. Haight (1992) suggests that “Bessie [Garner] seems a more likely prototype of Lucy Deane than George Eliot’s sister Chrissey, who is traditionally assigned the part” (17), and that Chrissey is the model for Gritty Moss instead (17).(^)

(7) Hunt undercuts this somewhat when, a few pages later, she suggests that,

despite Lucy’s goodness the reader always is aware that Maggie towers above her cousin intellectually and spiritually. Phillip Waken, not Lucy, offers Maggie the high-minded friendship which her noble nature craves. In short, Lucy is a ‘duckling,’ and a duckling can only make limited contributions to the life of a ‘cygnet.’ (152)

It is unclear the extent to which Hunt herself agrees with this (de)valuation of Lucy: she observes that “George Eliot divides the female world between exceptional women and ordinary women” (152), and criticizes this on the grounds that it dismisses the possibility of a female community, but does not comment further on the characterization of Lucy herself.(^)

(8) The narrator, in free indirect discourse, gives Stephen’s reasons for pursuing Lucy:

Was not Stephen Guest right in his decided opinion that this slim maiden of eighteen was quite the sort of wife a man would not be likely to repent of marrying?—a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them? Perhaps the emphasis of his admiration did not fall precisely on this rarest quality in her—perhaps he approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications. (370)(^)

(9) Adam reads Hetty’s beauty as indicating a soft heart, gentle temper, and pliant character (215), and thinks, “[h]ow she will dote on her children!” (215).(^)

(10) On feminine accomplishments (specifically needlework, with which we see Lucy engaged) and their scope for creativity, see Rohan Maitzen’s *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing* (1998), which includes a chapter entitled “Stiches in Time: Needlework and Victorian Historiography” in which Maitzen explores the clash between feminist and class-conscious criticism in analyses of women’s needlework as creative expression.(^)

(11) Audrey Jaffe, in her important work *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Repression in Victorian Fiction* (2000), observes, “in Victorian discussions [. . .] sympathy tends to appear explicitly as a woman’s issue” (17). Nancy Roberts, in *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (1997), explores the phenomenon by which “[w]e continue to view sympathy and empathy as female traits” (22). Both Roberts and Jennifer Phegley (2004) have done provocative work showing the links made between femininity, sympathy, and reading in the nineteenth century. In *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sado-masochistic Sentiments from*

Clarissa to Rescue 911 (1999), Laura Hinton, despite her interest in the masculine gaze sometimes implicated in sympathy, acknowledges, “[t]he reproduction of sentiment calls forth images of femininity, sympathy, and virtuous moral feeling” (2).(^)

(12) This way of reading the cousins is made explicit by the text itself, when Philip tells Maggie, ominously, “perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St Oggs at her feet now: and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams” (332).(^)

(13) Marcus observes: “the text does not support a reading of the two cousins as simple rivals for the love of Stephen Guest” (81).(^)

(14) Maggie tells Philip:

‘I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones.’ (332).(^)

(15) The narrator relates how “[a] mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm, and showered kisses on it,” and that, afterward, Stephen “leaned back against the framework of the conservatory, dizzy with the conflict of passion—love, rage, and confused despair: despair at his want of self-mastery, and despair that he had offended Maggie” (442).(^)

(16) When Stephen insists that they have both “loved with our whole heart and soul” (476), Maggie replies, “No—not with my whole heart and soul [. . .] I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories, and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long [. . .]” (476).(^)

(17) In *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2001), Leila Silvana May asks, “[c]ould Stephen Guest have truly fulfilled Maggie’s desire?” and argues that this “is doubtful,” because “[h]e is indeed a guest—more of a temporary visitor than an inhabitant in her life” (83). Similarly, in *Criticism and Ideology: a Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (2006), Terry Eagleton argues that Stephen “cannot represent a true fulfillment” for Maggie, because of his “personal flaws,” which Eagleton relates to his class position as “an overbred product of the predatory capitalism which is ousting the old rural world of her father” (115). In a feminist reading of the novel, Rachel M. Brownstein dismisses Stephen as “nearly as simple and unimaginative as Tom Tulliver” (204).(^)

(18) This scene of reconciliation between Maggie and Lucy anticipates Dorothea’s offer of sympathy to Rosamond in the final book of *Middlemarch*. This is noteworthy, in that Lucy plays the part of Dorothea, who, by the end of *Middlemarch*, comes close to embodying the kind of sympathy that George Eliot champions. (^)

(19) In observing that Philip's letter to Maggie is, in part, a means by which he defines his own subject position, I do not mean to deny the deep sympathy it so clearly demonstrates, but, rather, to show how his sympathy differs from that of Lucy. In affirming the value of the latter I by no means intend to devalue the former, but, rather, to suggest the ways in which gender inflects sympathy and its various expressions in the novel. Lucy's sympathy does not lend itself as obviously as Philip's to a full-fledged philosophy of sympathy, but this should not mean that it is not acknowledged as sympathy. (^)

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