

Maggie Tulliver and the Emergence of the Victorian Tomboy

George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) introduces the precocious, problematic, and undeniably endearing tomboy as a figure who strives to fulfill the standards of femininity expected of her. Maggie Tulliver's differences from those around her confirm the binaries that define her world; her unusual appetite for consuming knowledge ultimately catalyzes her own downfall, demonstrating the ramifications of wanting too much as a female.

Maggie's considerable capacity for introspection allows her to see – and be deeply troubled by – the awareness that the things that make her happiest are also what alienate her from and cause the most distress for those she loves. The more she strives to fulfill her family's expectations by denying her true self and interests, the further she strays from the possibility of any sort of identity catharsis. Eliot's haphazardly mixed metaphors emphasize the extent to which Maggie occupies a constantly changing undefined liminal space: she is described as animal (vs. human), brown (vs. white), gypsy (vs. English), and inappropriately curious (vs. properly submissive).

By examining nineteenth-century conceptions of sexuality and employing Lorde's definition of the erotic, I maintain that Maggie's insatiable needs to love and learn are interpreted by her family as inappropriately masculine expressions of eroticism unbecoming for a daughter whose submission would be far more beneficial than the exceptional autodidacticism that renders her "dangerous" and "untameable." Maggie's particular brand of Victorian tomboyhood presents a sort of radical conservatism, one that seeks to uphold that which suppresses her.