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**"BETWEEN THE INWARD IMPULSE AND THE OUTWARD FACT":  
TRAGEDY IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS***

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## TERMO DE APROVAÇÃO

"BETWEEN THE INWARD IMPULSE AND THE OUTWARD FACT": TRAGEDY IN  
GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

por

CAROLINA LAURINO ROSSINI

Este Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (TCC) foi apresentado em 27 de novembro de 2015 como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras Português-Inglês. A candidata foi arguida pela Banca Examinadora composta pelos professores abaixo assinados. Após deliberação, a Banca Examinadora considerou o trabalho aprovado.

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Dedico este trabalho aos meus pais, que  
sempre me encorajaram a correr atrás dos  
meus objetivos.

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*The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record.*

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

## ABSTRACT

ROSSINI, Carolina Laurino. "**Between the inward impulse and the outward fact**": **Tragedy in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss***. 2015. 52f. Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso. Curso de Licenciatura em Letras Português/Inglês, Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná.

Moral dilemmas, human sympathy and sense of duty are the central themes that pervade George Eliot's *oeuvre*. Her interest in these issues led her to find in the idea of tragedy a suitable means of artistic expression for her moral and aesthetic concerns. The present work lies in the area of English Literature and aims at investigating how George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* ([1860]2012) brings about a modernization of the classic Greek concept of tragedy. Based on the readings of Aristotle (2013) and Eliot (1990a), we analyse how the writer incorporates and modernizes the concept of tragedy in her novel and in which ways the protagonist, Maggie Tulliver, can be considered a tragic heroine. Through the study of the tragic aspect of her novel, it is noticeable that Eliot departs from the formal elements of the Aristotelian tragedy but keeps its essence. The novelist also redefines the concept of the tragic hero: she wrests tragedy from the sphere of kings and gods and places it among the ordinary people.

**Keywords:** English Literature. George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. Tragedy. Aristotle.

## RESUMO

ROSSINI, Carolina Laurino. "**Between the inward impulse and the outward fact**": **Tragedy in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss***. 2015. 52f. Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Licenciatura em Letras Português-Ingês) - Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná. Curitiba, 2015.

Dilemas morais, simpatia nas relações humanas e senso de responsabilidade são temas centrais que permeiam a obra de George Eliot. O interesse da autora nesses temas a levaram a encontrar na ideia da tragédia um meio de expressão artística compatível com suas preocupações morais e estéticas. O seguinte trabalho está inserido na área de Literatura Inglesa e tem por objetivo investigar como o romance *The Mill on the Floss* ([1860]2012) de George Eliot apresenta uma modernização do conceito Grego clássico de tragédia. Com base nas leituras de Aristóteles (2013) e Eliot (1990a), analisamos de que modo a escritora incorpora e moderniza o conceito Grego clássico de tragédia na obra e em que medida a protagonista, Maggie Tulliver, pode ser considerada uma heroína trágica. Por meio do estudo do aspecto trágico do romance, pode-se observar que Eliot abandona os elementos formais da tragédia aristotélica mas mantém sua essência. A escritora também redefine o conceito de herói trágico: Eliot retira a tragédia do domínio dos reis e dos deuses e a concede aos homens comuns.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura Inglesa. George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. Tragédia. Aristóteles.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

George Eliot is considered one of the most important novelists in 19th-century English literature<sup>1</sup>. Her *Adam Bede* (ELIOT, 2014), first published in 1859, was translated into German, Dutch, French and even Hungarian and Russian. One of the Russian editions was read by Tolstoy, who declared the book was among examples of "highest art" (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 279). Her *Middlemarch* (ELIOT, 2000) had sold more than 30.000 copies by 1879, seven years after its first publication. Her success as a writer was undeniable at her time.

It is true that she went through a period of unpopularity after her death, but the distance of time and "enormous social changes have made it possible for readers in the last half of the twentieth century to rediscover the pleasures of George Eliot's fiction" (LEVINE, 2001, p. 1). And one of the reasons why her work still deserves attention lies especially in the fact that her novels approach themes inherent to the life of contemporary readers.

She has left a legacy that is badly distorted if we look at the novels as "classics," frozen in time, rather than as works created by an imagination that was deeply informed by the nitty gritty of social engagement, of contemporary controversy, of anything but a pure life (LEVINE, 2001, p. 3).

In her novels, Eliot discusses human dilemmas, the moral and ethical concerns she considered intrinsic to human existence. As George Levine points out, for Eliot, the moral and the aesthetic aspects were intertwined in a way that "to treat art lightly [...] was to fail not only aesthetically, but morally" (LEVINE, 2001, p. 8). Thus, the novelist found in the modernization of the concept of tragedy a means of artistic expression for both her moral and aesthetic interests.

This work proposes to analyse how George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* effects a modernization of the Greek concept of tragedy. We reflect upon the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and on how Eliot has appropriated and modernized this concept in her fiction, in order to ascertain in which ways it appears in the novel. We hope to be able to demonstrate that the themes which constitute the tragic clash in *The Mill on the Floss* - sense of duty, moral dilemmas, human sympathy - pervade her fiction. Due to this, we also contemplate throughout this study other novels from Eliot's body of work. Finally, we verify in which sense the protagonist Maggie Tulliver may be interpreted as a tragic heroine.

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<sup>1</sup> See LEAVIS, 1980 and BONAPARTE, 1975.

*The Mill on the Floss* (ELIOT, 2012) was first published in 1860. In the novel, George Eliot depicts the lives of ordinary people and brings up the ethical and moral dilemmas she had long been concerned with. This is done especially through the character of Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist of the story. During the whole of her life, the girl faces moral conflicts that acquire tragic proportions and end only with her death. This way, Eliot creates a modernized tragic heroine, as we argue in our analysis. Therefore, in this study, we consider the tragic aspect of Eliot's fiction as a central point to understand her novel and as key to interpret its protagonist.

This work is divided into six parts. In the introduction, we present our aims and delimitate our study object. In the following chapter, we report on previous research about the theme of tragedy in Eliot's works. The third chapter brings our theoretical framework, in which we present and discuss the texts that compose the basis of our analysis. In the fourth chapter, we discuss the elemental features of George Eliot's program of realism. The fifth chapter is divided into two sections and contains our analysis of tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss*. In its first section, we verify the tragic elements in the plot of the novel. Subsequently, we analyse Maggie Tulliver as a tragic heroine. Finally, in the last part of this work, we present our final considerations and comment on our findings.

## 2 STUDIES ON TRAGEDY IN GEORGE ELIOT'S FICTION

"The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it."  
(George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*)

This chapter aims at discussing works that somehow look into the tragic aspect of Eliot's novels. By examining these studies, we are able to form an idea of how tragedy seems to be perceived as a strong point in the novelist's *oeuvre*. Nevertheless, we also place this section here in order to clarify in which ways our analysis of tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss* differs from previous research on the matter.

In an attempt to find studies on George Eliot in Brazil, it is noticeable that the novelist is not highly popular in the Brazilian academic world. A brief survey through Brazilian databases reveals only two theses and four dissertations about her fiction<sup>2</sup>. When it comes to *The Mill on the Floss*, only chapters inside some of these works regard the novel. If we try to find papers related to the theme of tragedy in the book, it becomes even more difficult. We looked for "*The Mill on the Floss*" and "Tragedy" in *Periodicos Capes* and could find 22 results<sup>3</sup> among reviews and articles. None of them, however, approaches the theme the way we intend to do: the tragic aspects of Eliot's novel are only incidentally mentioned and are not investigated at any length.

In the article *Error that is anguish to its own nobleness: shame and tragedy in The Mill on the Floss* (2003), Joseph Adamson draws a comparison between the main character of Eliot's novel, Maggie Tulliver, and the protagonist of Sophocle's *Ajax* (SOPHOCLES, 2010). First, he defines *The Mill* as a tragic *Bildungsroman*, hinting at the importance of heeding the protagonist's moral and psychological growth in the novel. He then argues that Maggie's unresolved emotional conflicts make her act impulsively, and that it results in a tragic error. It follows that the girl achieves a tragic recognition in the same way that happens to the tragic hero in *Ajax*.

Adamson affirms that one element that Eliot's novel and Sophocle's play have in common is "the central role of shame as a psychological force in the [characters'] downfall" (ADAMSON, 2003, p. 317). Nonetheless, by claiming that shame is a paramount attribute in

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<sup>2</sup> Access on October 30th 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Access on November 3rd 2015.

the tragedy of these protagonists, he fails to consider the pivotal aspect that, for Eliot, holds the essence of tragedy: a collision between two valid principles. This feature is explored more thoughtfully in our theoretical basis. Adamson, therefore, focuses solely on the protagonists' tragic recognition, claiming that it brings with it "unbearable shame, a mortification in which one's view of oneself is irreparably damaged" (ADAMSON, 2003, p. 325) in both stories. He does not explore the essential components of tragedy as we intend to do - instead, the researcher sticks to a comparison between the Greek play and Eliot's novel.

In her dissertation, Bayer (1979) investigates, as the title clearly states, the *Theme of education through conflict in the early novels of George Eliot*. She compares the development of the topic in three of Eliot's works, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ELIOT, 2007), *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. In her chapter on *The Mill on the Floss*, the researcher argues that the "main theme of the novel, which is Maggie's and Tom's education through conflict, achieves a tragic end because of Maggie's inner conflict, which remains unresolved to the end" (BAYER, 1979, p. 64). For Bayer, this conflict comes from a "psychological problem" (ibidem), and "from error— since she [Maggie] does not manage to keep a balance between reason and heart" (BAYER, 1979, p. 85), and this is what causes the heroine to clash with the external world.

By stating this, Bayer attenuates the constraints set by Tom Tulliver, the Dodsons and the society of St. Ogg's as a whole: although she reminds her reader that the restraints exist, the researcher suggests Maggie is guilty for not submitting to them. In fact, such view departs from Eliot's own considerations about the tragic conflict, as we explain in our theoretical basis. However, the focus of Bayer's study is not primarily on Maggie as a tragic heroine. Although she does observe that this is what the protagonist is, the researcher does not explore any concepts of the classic tragedy. Instead, she aims at investigating Maggie's emotional, intellectual and moral growth in the novel. She concludes that the girl is incapable of achieving "complete harmony between her inner self and the external world [...] except when her conflict ends by death" (BAYER, 1979, p. 70).

Perhaps the most significant work which regards Eliot's novels as tragedies is Felicia Bonaparte's *Will and Destiny: morality and tragedy in George Eliot's Novels* (1975). In the very introduction of her book, the scholar states that one of the claims "we have seldom heard and never taken quite seriously is Eliot's assertion that her novels were, in the strictest sense, tragedies, and moreover, Aristotelian tragedies" (BONAPARTE, 1975, xi). She presents examples from Eliot's fiction and argues that they contain the essence of the classic Greek tragedy. Yet, we need to understand that this essence is adapted to the modern context. Eliot

herself discussed the relation between tragedy and the modern society in her essay *The Antigone and its Moral* (1990a). We rely on this essay to understand in which sense her novels may be considered Aristotelian tragedies and how, at the same time, they differ from the classic Greek tragedy.

In this chapter, we reported on the most significant works we were able to find about tragedy in George Eliot's fiction. Although there seems to be a general recognition regarding the importance of the idea of tragedy in Eliot's body of work, we could find no systematized study on the importance of the Aristotelian concept in her novels as we propose to do in this thesis.

### 3 TRAGEDY

"The existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life."  
(George Eliot, *Adam Bede*)

Inasmuch as we are dealing with tragedy, it is necessary to consider Aristotle's *Poetics* (2013), in which we can find the philosopher's definition of tragedy and of the tragic hero. For the purposes of this work, we also need to behold Eliot's own concept of tragedy, which can be found in her essay *The Antigone and its Moral* (1990a). In this chapter, we present and discuss these two texts, which compose the core of our analysis.

#### 3.1 ARISTOTLE REVISITED: THE GREEK CLASSIC CONCEPT

"O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being "the freshest modern" instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech, as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor, – that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else?"  
(George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*)

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, we can find the philosopher's definition of tragedy: "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; [...] found in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 10). Later on, he describes the six structural parts of a tragedy, which "determine its quality— namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song" (ibidem).

As *The Mill on the Floss* is a novel, it initially does not seem to fit Aristotle's definition. First, because the story is in form of narrative, not of action, and this is exactly the opposite of what the philosopher states. Secondly, because it clearly lacks some of the six parts mentioned above: there is no spectacle, song, or diction - "the metrical arrangement of words" (ibidem) -, for example. On the other hand, even though Aristotle underlines the

importance of these six parts, he affirms afterwards that the fundamental one is “the structure of the incidents” (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 10), that is, the plot. For him, the plot holds the essence of tragedy. He concludes that “the plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy” (ibidem). Therefore, *The Mill on the Floss* can be considered a tragic work, provided that its plot contains the substance tragedy requires, for “the power of tragedy [...] is felt even apart from representation and actors” (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 12).

Aristotle proceeds to describe two different types of plot a tragedy may have.

Plots are either simple or complex [...] simple, when the change of fortune takes place without reversal of the situation and without recognition. A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such reversal, or by recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 15).

The change of fortune appears both in the simple and in the complex plot, but the complex one contains two events that precede this change: the reversal of situation (*peripeteia*), that is, “a change by which the action veers round to its opposite” (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 15), and the recognition (*anagnorisis*)<sup>4</sup>, “a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined [...] for good or bad fortune” (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 16). In other words, the *peripeteia* happens when there is a disparity between the intention and the consequences of an act. What must follow is the *anagnorisis*, which can be of various types - a recognition between persons, a recognition of an object, a discovery that something has or has not been done and of its effects. Both incidents are part of the tragic plot and do not have to be performed or achieved exclusively by the tragic hero.

In *Oedipus the King* (SOPHOCLES, 2010), Oedipus reaches an *anagnorisis* when he finds out he is Laius and Jocasta's son and not Polybus and Merope's, as he had believed hitherto. This is also a moment of *anagnorisis* for Jocasta, for she did not know about the truth as well. And since the hero had killed his father and married his mother, he had therefore accomplished what his prophecy determined - even though he did all he could to avoid it. Thus, a *peripeteia* had already happened.

What results from these events is the change of fortune which, for the purposes of tragedy - producing pity and fear -, should be “not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek terms *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* (or *peripety*) are used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and correspond respectively to the recognition and to the reversal of situation of the tragedy. Although the translation of *Poetics* we rely on in this work does not bring these terms, we adopt them in order to avoid the repetition of the expressions “tragic recognition” and “reversal of situation” throughout the analysis.



to bad" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 17), even though the opposite change is also possible in action. After that, the "scene of suffering" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 16) should follow, a "destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like" (ibidem). It happens as an outcome of the previous parts of the tragedy, for the whole structure of incidents must be "subject always to our rule of probability or necessity" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 15), as it is in *Oedipus the King*. When the truth is revealed about Oedipus' parents, Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus, in agony, removes the pins that held her hair together and pierces his own eyes. Therefore, all events are connected in a probable sequence and lead to Oedipus' change of fortune and subsequent scene of suffering: he finds Jocasta dead and blinds himself.

Thus, according to Aristotle, the events in an ideal tragic plot must respect a chain of cause and effect.

Every tragedy falls into two parts, — complication and unravelling or denouement [...] By the complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The unravelling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 24).

The philosopher asserts that "the unravelling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the 'Deus ex Machina'" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 20-21). In other words, a situation must not be solved or complicated by supernatural forces, magic or even unlikely events<sup>5</sup>. Each act must be connected and lead to a probable consequence. In Sophocle's *Antigone* (2005), for example, the heroine is buried alive after disrespecting Creon's order. Creon's son, Haemon, who intended to marry the girl, kills himself when he hears about Antigone's death. Finally, Creon's wife, Eurydice, commits suicide because she cannot bear losing her son. All the events are connected and result in the scene of suffering in the end. Hence there is a change of fortune in the play that is an outcome of the characters own acts.

Another definition we need to consider in Aristotle's work is the one of the tragic hero. For "action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 10). That is, a tragedy fundamentally requires a tragic hero, the

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle opposes to the intervention of a "deus ex machina" in the plot, but this is not to say that such literary device does not exist in Greek tragedy. In *Medea* (EURIPIDES, 1993), for example, there is a manifestation of a "deus ex machina" in the end: when Jason is about to put his hands on Medea, she escapes in a winged chariot sent by Helios.

personal agent, who needs to have, according to Aristotle, “distinctive qualities”. Afterwards, the philosopher defines the tragic hero as “a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous” (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 17). Our heroine, the protagonist Maggie Tulliver, is certainly not “highly renowned and prosperous”. Quite the contrary, she is a common girl, who leads a common life and comes from a common family. In our analysis, we intend to argue that although Maggie does not fit Aristotle’s description completely, she can be considered a tragic heroine due to Eliot’s redefinition of this type of character.

The tragic hero hence brings his own downfall, his change of fortune, but "it should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 17-18). It means that the Aristotelian tragic hero must not be a villain or a cruel person, for the downfall of such person would not arouse pity and fear. Instead, the reason for his misfortune must be in a tragic flaw, that is, a frailty. After all, the plot is the first principle of the tragedy, but what comes in the second place is character, which "determines men’s qualities" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 11) and "comes in as subsidiary to the actions" (ibidem).

These are the aspects of the Aristotelian tragedy we have to consider for the purposes of this study. Nonetheless, it is important to draw attention to the fact that Aristotle designed a theory of tragedy based on the Greek drama of his time. In this work, we analyse a novel written in the 19th-century England. In order to make it possible, we need to understand in which sense Aristotle's definitions are kept and how, at the same time, George Eliot updates them.

### 3.2 GEORGE ELIOT'S CONCEPT: A "COLLISION OF FORCES"

"She was thrown back again on the conflict between the demands of an outward law, which she recognised as a widely-ramifying obligation, and the demands of inner moral facts which were becoming more and more peremptory."  
(George Eliot, *Romola*)

As mentioned in the second chapter, Bonaparte (1975, p. xi) declares that Eliot’s novels are “in the strictest sense” Aristotelian tragedies. Subsequently, she explains that

Certainly there is nothing like a traditional tragic hero in Eliot's novels. No one, in fact, comes close to that Aristotelian figure of great stature on whose fortunes depends a state or a kingdom. Quite the contrary. Most of Eliot's characters are, in the conventional terms of tragic judgment, insignificant, [...] But unlike Greek tragedy, Eliot's novels embody the myths in the concrete and often sordid fact and as we focus on these petty scenes, as Eliot insists we must, the grander framework seems to slip away, or returns only to mock the commonplace events (BONAPARTE, 1975, xii).

The two ideas defended by Bonaparte may seem contradictory if we look at them only superficially. If she claims that Eliot's novels are "in the strictest sense" Aristotelian tragedies, how can she possibly affirm later on that "there is nothing like a traditional hero" in them? What does she mean when she argues that the writer's novels "embody the myth in the concrete fact" and that the "grander framework seems to slip away"? In order to answer these questions, we need to seek Eliot's own concept of tragedy, which can be found in her essay *The Antigone and its Moral*.

In Eliot's fiction there is not a simple modernization of the concept of tragedy, but one that is suitable for her moral and artistic concerns, as we comment more deeply in the next section of this study. In her essay *The Antigone and its Moral*, the novelist discusses the status of tragedy in modern times. First, she disagrees with the claim that tragedy is "foreign to modern sympathies" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 363). Giving the example of Sophocle's *Antigone*, she asserts that it is true that gods and the consequences of neglecting funeral rites may no longer appeal to modern readers. However, she goes on to state that these are "not the substance of the poet's conception" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 364). It means that the gods and the rites of burial are not, in her view, the essence of tragedy in that play. She points out that

The turning point of the tragedy is not [...] 'reverence for the dead and the importance of the sacred rites of burial', but the conflict between these and obedience to the State. Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each other (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 364).

The key for Eliot's concept of tragedy is in the passage quoted above: tragedy exists when "two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each other". And it is in this clash, or in this "collision of forces" (1975, p. xvi), as Bonaparte writes, that Eliot centers her plots. Therefore, considering Aristotle's claim that the plot is the chief part of the tragedy, we can argue that *The Mill on the Floss* is a modern tragic work provided that we are able to find a clash of valid principles in its plot. However, we must highlight that Aristotle analysed

tragedy as a genre, based on his knowledge of the tragedies existing in his time. Eliot, on the other hand, does not recreate tragedy as a genre but as a valid way of understanding life and art. Thus, Eliot's concept differs from Aristotle's in the very fact that she does not establish a terminology of modern tragedy. The novelist neither defines what a modern tragic hero is, nor determines the parts the plot must contain. She simply makes it clear that even without gods and kings, tragedy is still possible, as long as its substance is kept.

But, is it the fact that this antagonism of valid principles is peculiar to polytheism? Is it not rather that the struggle between Antigone and Creon represents that struggle between elemental tendencies and established laws by which the outer life of man is gradually and painfully being brought into harmony with his inward needs. Until this harmony is perfected, we shall never be able to attain a great right without also doing a wrong (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 365).

If we heed the writer's statement that the struggle in the *Antigone* play represents the battles of every man to conciliate his outer life and inward needs, we can make sense of Bonaparte's assertion: when she claims that George Eliot's novels "embody the myths in the concrete and often sordid fact" and that the "grander framework seems to slip away, or returns only to mock the commonplace events", she means that the novelist writes the tragedy of common people. If Eliot insists that we focus on "petty scenes", it is because such scenario does not hinder tragedy from existing. Quite the contrary, the average men and their painful moral conflicts are the most appropriate subjects for her tragedy, given the writer's conception of realism (which we discuss in the next chapter of this work).

*The Antigone and its Moral* was written in 1856, four years before the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* and almost one hundred years before Arthur Miller's essay *Tragedy and the common man* (1949). Miller too noticed what Eliot had shown almost a century before in her novels: "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (MILLER, 1949)<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in Eliot's claim that the struggle in *Antigone* does not find place exclusively among kings and gods, she redefines the concept of the tragic hero. Such hero does not have to be highly renowned, neither does he have to possess distinctive qualities, as in Aristotle's definition. Instead, her modern tragic hero is the ordinary man or woman.

Hence, by creating common heroes and heroines whose inner nature collides with their outer reality, Eliot restores the conflict from the Greek drama. After all, as she observes,

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<sup>6</sup> *Tragedy and the Common Man* was published in 1949 in *The New York Times*, hence there are no numbered pages to be indicated in the quotations we use in this study.

wherever "the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 366). Therefore, even though the novelist does not describe in her essay a detailed theory of modern tragedy, her ideas of tragedy and of the tragic hero are clear.

Finally, there is one more point to be emphasized in George Eliot's essay, which is important to the analysis we propose here. The collision of forces that holds the substance of the tragedy needs to be of a specific type: it has to be a clash between *valid* claims. In Eliot's statement that tragedy exists in such collision, she means that *both* principles must have their validity. Proceeding with her comments on Sophocles' *Antigone*, she affirms that

It is a very superficial criticism which interprets the character of Creon as that of a hypocritical tyrant, and regards Antigone as a blameless victim. [...] Creon, as well as Antigone, is contending for what he believes to be the right, while both are also conscious that, in following out one principle, they are laying themselves open to just blame for transgressing another; and it is this consciousness which secretly heightens the exasperation of Creon and the defiant hardness of Antigone (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 365).

In our analysis, we intend to demonstrate that Maggie's conflicts are part of her tragic journey in this sense, considering the clashes between *valid* claims we can find in the novel.

#### 4 GEORGE ELIOT'S REALISM: "A FAITHFUL ACCOUNT OF MEN AND THINGS"

"Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."  
(George Eliot, *The Natural History of German Life*)

George Eliot's novels are placed within the realm of realism. In this chapter, we present the central features of her realist program. These aspects are a key to understand the incorporation of tragedy to the novelist's fiction. In fact, Eliot's project of realism made it inevitable for her to approach the human moral dilemmas that are part of her characters' tragic conflicts, as we discuss in this chapter.

The energizing principle of George Eliot's art was realism. And realism is a mode that depends heavily on reaction against what the writer takes to have been misrepresentation. [...] It is rarely, and certainly was not for George Eliot, simply accuracy in representation of things as they are, although it is always that, too [...] It is also and necessarily a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one's own feelings and perceptions; otherwise accuracy of representation would itself be impossible (LEVINE, 2001, p. 7).

But in order to establish the relation between tragedy and realism in Eliot's fiction, we need to look more closely at the recurring themes that permeate her *oeuvre* and that integrate this relation. Sense of duty, morality, sympathy and ethics in human relations are issues through which Eliot approaches reality in her works. These themes are in the basis of the tragic conflicts found in her plots and therefore they are themes to be considered in this chapter. It is also important to understand the influence of determinism and empiricism in Eliot's novels. Thus, throughout this chapter, we discuss how determinism operates in her characters' tragic collisions and how she adopts the empirical method in order to fulfill her commitment as a novelist.

Although George Eliot is claimed to be one of the greatest novelists of her time, she is virtually unknown in Brazil and went through a period of severe decline of popularity in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe as well. As George Levine points out,

unlike the most famous of literary Victorians, Charles Dickens, whose popularity [...] survived the sophisticated ironies of literary modernism, George Eliot fell into the disrepute that attended almost all things Victorian in the early twentieth century. The two great writers were, in most respects, polar opposites; Dickens the great

popular entertainer, George Eliot the voice of a higher culture, learned, self-reflexive, tormented by her own aesthetic and moral aspirations. It was her deep seriousness and determined pursuit of respectability that, ironically, turned modernist writers - many of them, clearly, her direct literary descendants - away from her (LEVINE, 2001, p. 1).

But if she fell into disrepute in the beginning of the last century, in its second half she started being rediscovered and recognized as an outstanding writer. Contemporary critics argue on the important role she plays in the history of the English novel. According to Bodenheimer, Eliot has

a class perspective that differs significantly from those of other Victorian novelists. She is less likely to depict the social world as divided into starkly oppositional social classes, or to join the Victorian obsession with stories of social aspiration and social oppression, than she is to create a variegated community in which the story centers on the fates of characters who disturb or violate the norms of belief or behavior in that community (BODENHEIMER, 2001, p. 21).

And her innovative views not only partially break with some of her contemporary writers, but are also claimed to forecast certain literary trends.

Her novels open new directions in English narrative: psychologically, she richly anticipates the Freudian understanding of the power of the irrational to determine human behavior; she, more than any novelist before Henry James, understood and explored the problems of perspective, of "point of view"; for better or worse, and I take it as for the better, she made the novel as a form something more than, or at least in addition to, popular entertainment, and in this respect certainly anticipated (of course again for better or worse) the directions of modernism (LEVINE, 2001, p. 18).

Taking Levine's words into consideration, it is possible to argue that her novels work, in a sense, as a threshold: they anticipate what writers such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad and James Joyce were to produce later in English literature. Therefore, if we regard literature as an order in the same way that T. S. Eliot does in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, we can understand the importance of studying George Eliot's novels in the 21st century.

In fact, the novelist is not so distant from the 21st-century reader as she may seem. When discussing the relation between literature and life, Anger (2001) draws attention to a change that has possibly awakened Eliot's readers in the late twentieth century. She explains that literature has become an efficient means of ethical reflection once again.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that some ethical truths are presentable only in the form of narrative, which can illustrate the complexities, particularities, and nuances of life, in ways that abstract philosophical treatments of ethics are incapable of doing (ANGER, 2001, p. 92).

George Eliot was concerned with ethical and philosophical issues from real life, which were reflected in her fiction. Another prominent scholar, Felicia Bonaparte, contributes to this idea by claiming that it is not “historical curiosity that attracts the contemporary reader but a growing awareness that Eliot speaks as immediately to the modern consciousness as the most current writer” (BONAPARTE, 1975, vii).

Reflection on morality, ethics and responsibility appears in her portrayal of the tragic human condition throughout her work.

George Eliot’s novels do philosophical work and enrich ethical discussion [...] She often represents moral dilemmas, situations in which a character seems to be morally obligated to do both of two actions, but cannot do both of them. Though the narratives always invoke duty, it is not easy to see what particular duty might override another (ANGER, 2001, p. 93).

In *Adam Bede*, Adam is in love with a vain girl called Hetty Sorrel. He is blinded by her external beauty and cannot give up his idealized view of her to see that she is, like anyone else, an imperfect human being liable to make mistakes, until he discovers her crime: Hetty buries her newborn child alive in order to avoid shame and scandal for having gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Although she does regret it, her deed cannot be undone; hence she has to bear its consequences. Hetty is convicted of murder.

At first, Adam is incapable of accepting the fact.

"No—O God, no", Adam groaned out, sinking on his chair again; "but then, that's the deepest curse of all... that's what makes the blackness of it... it *can never be undone*. My poor Hetty... she can never be my sweet Hetty again... the prettiest thing God had made—smiling up at me... I thought she loved me... and was good..." (ELIOT, 2014, p. 419).

He feels hurt. He had often in the novel put his own feelings before others' and harshly judged others' deeds - except Hetty's. However, this is for him a moment of realization: Adam reflects about his harshness in judging the people around him. Instead of turning his back on Hetty for feeling hurt, he declares he will stand by her. "I'll own her—for all she's been deceitful. [...] I used to be hard sometimes: I'll never be hard again." (ELIOT, 2014, p. 426). In his decision to attend her trial and stand by her despite being disappointed, the protagonist demonstrates sympathy. Thus, Eliot explores through the characters of this novel human imperfections and fosters reflection on responsibility, ethics and morality in human relations.



These themes also appear in *Middlemarch* (ELIOT, 2000). In this novel, Eliot discusses the consequences of one's choices. This she does by depicting the tensions in the failing marriages of both Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate. The novelist also focuses on the character's inner conflicts. When Dorothea mistakenly concludes that Ladislaw and Rosamond are having an affair, she considers exposing the couple but finds herself torn between her own incipient desires towards Ladislaw and her respect for Rosamond. As soon as her sleepless night ends, she asks herself: "What should I do – how should I act now?" (ELIOT, 2000, p. 648). About this particular scene, Anger (2001) observes that "Eliot poses within the dramatic circumstances of an individual life a question she had asked many times through other characters and that had become the central question of modern ethics" (ANGER, 2001, p. 79).

Given these two examples, it is possible to form an idea of how Eliot fosters reflection on the moral and ethical issues intrinsic to human existence in her fiction. Thus, studying her novels in our times is a way of rethinking the correspondence between literature and life that has been central to the English novel from its beginning. After all, as Ian Watt claims, "the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality it imitates" (WATT, 2000, p. 365) is an issue that the novel "raises more sharply than any other literary form" (*ibidem*).

Imitating reality is not a simple project. It is considerably difficult, if not impossible, to reach a consensus of accuracy in the representation of reality - especially because of the difficulty in determining precisely what reality consists of. The present study deals with a novel that belongs to the 19th-century English literary realism. But it turns out that this period of English literature is more complex than an attempt at sheer representation of reality itself.

Realism, throughout the nineteenth century, remained an ambivalent and often self-contradictory mode. It was most consistent in its determination to find strategies for describing the world as it was. It was inconsistent because every artist's conception of what the world was like differed and because the world changed from moment to moment, generation to generation. But it was consistent, too, in addressing ethical issues raised by developments in contemporary economy and society [...] (LEVINE, 2010, p. 30).

Throughout the 19th century, there are several authors whose works are placed within the realist sphere: Charles Dickens, known as a writer of the social novel, the one who is often said to create caricatures, who depicts the poverty in the streets of London and matters of class struggle in novels such as *Oliver Twist* ([1837]1992) and *Bleak House* (2001[1853]); William Thackeray, famous for his satirical portrait of the upper-middle-class English society

in his *Vanity Fair* ([1847]2001); Thomas Hardy, frequently associated with the portrayal of the struggles between individual (especially women) and society in novels like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ([1891]1996) and *Jude the Obscure* ([1895]1993); just to name a few. In their novels, they create different characters and produce different pictures of society. Therefore, it is difficult to find a unity to define realism in this sense: it is, for the reasons explained by Levine, a multivalent term.

George Eliot is part of this complex scenario. Like the other Victorian writers, the novelist was quite aware of the obstacles of representing reality. Levine's statement about George Eliot's program of realism is in consonance with her own remark in *Adam Bede*. Eliot professes through the narrator of the novel her commitment as a novelist, which is

to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath (ELIOT, 2014, p. 175).

George Eliot was conscious of the fact that there might be distortions in the representations, but she establishes a contract with her reader based on truth telling. And in order to comply with such engagement, she relies on close observation of the represented object: ordinary people and their ordinary lives.

In her essay *The Natural History of German Life* (1990b), the novelist discusses the matter of representation more deeply.

But even those among our painters who aim at giving the rustic type of features [...] treat their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than on direct observation. The notion that peasants are joyous, that the typical moment to represent a man in a smock-frock is when he is cracking a joke and showing a row of sound teeth, that cottage matrons are usually buxom, and village children necessarily rosy and merry, are prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects into literature instead of life. The painter is still under the influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life (ELIOT, 1990b, p 108-109).

In the passage above, she refers to the painters' procedure when dealing with their subjects, but what is at stake is the matter of representation itself - the importance of looking for the objects in life and not in "traditions and prepossessions". Eliot takes direct observation quite seriously and even employs it as a literary device to convey realism, as in the opening

pages of *The Mill on the Floss*, when the narrator demonstrates to be familiar with Tom and Maggie's story.

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about as they sat by the bright fire in the left-handed parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of (ELIOT, 2012, p. 7).

In the first chapter of book fourth, the use of direct observation can be perceived in the portrayal provided by the narrator of the society of St. Ogg's.

Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet toward something beautiful, great, or noble; you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live [...] I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie - how it has acted on young natures in many generations (ELIOT, 2012, p. 304-305).

In order to present a depiction of that society, the narrator declares that it is necessary to observe those people narrowly. It is a claim that such portrait cannot be based on mere common sense but has to be provided through close examination. In other words, Eliot adopts the empirical method in her representation of human life<sup>7</sup>. It is part of the novelist's truth-telling commitment.

Therefore, empiricism is elemental in George Eliot's realist program<sup>8</sup>. Due to this - and given her commitment as a novelist -, her worldview had a large influence on her fiction. According to Bonaparte, Eliot's world was "tragic from its beginning" (BONAPARTE, 1975, p. xii), hence "the subject of her novels, which is indeed modern man, is, at the same time, the human race as a whole, the compact tragedy of everyman" (ibidem).

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to clarify that the empirical method does not belong exclusively to realism. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, we discuss empiricism particularly in its relation to the realist program.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that George Eliot is the only writer in the 19th-century English literature that relies on the empirical method in order to convey realism. However, the focus of this chapter is on George Eliot's approach to realism, which is important to understand the novel we analyse in this work. For this reason, we do not go further on a detailed study of English realism as a whole and do not contemplate other realist authors more deeply in this chapter.

Amidst the scientific tendencies from the 19th century that influenced Eliot's fiction, determinism plays a central role in the relation between realism and tragedy. Eliot creates characters that cannot control the consequences of their acts, but inside their human limitations, have choices to make. Such choices usually involve questions of responsibility, ethics, morality and sympathy, the themes that the writer explores in her characters' dilemmas throughout her work. In *Adam Bede*, Hetty's intercourse with Arthur Donnithorne leads to her unexpected pregnancy. In *Middlemarch*, Fred Vincy's gambling habit results in betting debts and Dorothea's obstinacy culminates in an unhappy marriage. All these characters have the opportunity to choose not to do what they had done, hence they are responsible for the consequences of their choices. These are simple instances of common-life situations in which people have decisions to make and cannot control the outcome according to their own will.

Thus, even though determinism appears in Eliot's novels, this is not to say that her characters are puppets in the hands of God or destiny. Determinism exists in George Eliot's fiction in the sense that man's free will is limited. Man's will does exist, and it is precisely what causes him to clash with the external fact and makes conflicts inevitable.<sup>9</sup> This is what makes tragedy possible, even inescapable, in Eliot's novels.

the "truth" George Eliot insists on is, primarily, the hard truth that the world is not made in our interest, not "mindful" of us. Reality is largely what conventional art would treat as banal and dismiss in the name of heroism or elegance. The sympathy her art is designed to evoke depends on a recognition of our mutual implication in ordinariness and limitation (LEVINE, 2001, p. 10).

George Eliot's fictional universe is knitted in a chain of cause and effect, just like the Aristotelian ideal plot of the tragedy. Because man cannot control the effect of his actions according to his own will, responsibility, ethics and sympathy are essential in human relations. The dilemmas Eliot's characters face spring from the very fact that they are responsible for their actions and choices, so that they have to think carefully before making a decision that involves others. Thus, Eliot's employment of determinism sets the collision between will and duty that provides a suitable scenario for tragedy in her fiction.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on that see LEVINE, 1962.

## 5 THE MILL ON THE FLOSS AS A MODERN TRAGEDY

"Maggie, in her brown frock, with her eyes reddened and her heavy hair pushed back, looking from the bed where her father lay to the dull walls of this sad chamber which was the centre of her world, was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life, and give her soul a sense of home in it."  
(George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*)

This chapter is destined to the analysis of the modernization of tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss*. It is divided into two parts: first, we present our analysis of the tragic elements found in the plot of the novel. In the second part, we analyse the protagonist Maggie Tulliver as a tragic heroine. But before moving forward, it is important to provide a general characterization of the tragic heroine of the novel.

The novel centers in the protagonist's moral dilemmas. Ever since she was a little girl, Maggie would fail to comply with standard social expectations. This can be perceived at her very first appearance in the story, when we are told that a "small mistake of nature entered the room" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 12). At that scene we learn that her mother, Bessy Tulliver, desires her daughter's dark hair would curl, like that of her pretty cousin Lucy. She also complains about Maggie's brown skin that "makes her look like a mulatter" (ibidem). Bessy often compares her daughter to her niece. In her opinion, Lucy is a perfect angel and Mrs. Tulliver even suggests she would rather have the girl as a daughter - "I'm sure Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does" (ibidem). Even Maggie's aunts would never leave her alone, commenting now and then about the fact that "the gell has too much hair" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 68), and that "it's very bad luck [...] as the gell should be so brown" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 74).

Besides her physical traits, Maggie's unorthodox behaviour also causes her to be constantly reprehended. Her love for books and her thirst for knowledge are not considered appropriate for a girl. Even her father, who normally defends his "little wench" from her mother's acid observations, feels uncomfortable about his daughter's admiration for the devil.

I'll tell you what he is. He's the Devil really (here Maggie's voice became louder and more emphatic), and not a right blacksmith; for the Devil takes the shape of wicked men, and walks about and sets people doing wicked things, and he's oftener in the shape of a bad man than any other, because, you know, if people saw he was the

Devil, and he roared at 'em, they'd run away, and he couldn't make 'em do what he pleased (ELIOT, 2012, p.17-18).

In the passage above, Maggie was enthusiastically showing the book she had been reading: *The History of the Devil* (DEFOE, 2014), by Daniel Defoe. But the adults' reaction was not the one she expected - Mr. Riley, her father's acquaintance, asks her if she did not have prettier books. "I know the reading in this book isn't pretty; but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head, you know" (ELIOT, 2012, p.18), she answers.

From this introduction to the protagonist of the novel, it is noticeable that the girl is likely to meet the moral dilemmas which are central in Eliot's conception of tragedy.

### 5.1 "THE SOUL OF TRAGEDY" IN *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

"No wonder, when there is this contrast between the  
outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it."  
(George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*)

As mentioned in the third chapter, Aristotle declares that the plot is the chief part of a tragedy: it is its soul. George Eliot, on the other hand, argues that the essence of tragedy is in a clash between valid principles. Whereas the philosopher's idea relates to the form of the tragedy, the novelist turns her attention to its content. Thus, in order to analyse Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* as a modern tragedy, we need to take a closer look at its plot and find that it contains a collision of valid claims.

Going through the plot of *The Mill on the Floss*, more than one manifestation of Aristotle's *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* can be evinced, which come as a result of Maggie's conflicts throughout her life. As the novel progresses, these moments of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* grow stronger and more significant, until the story reaches its denouement. Maggie's tragedy eventually arrives at its final cycle of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* - which leads to her greatest change of fortune and to the scene of suffering in the end.

The novel is divided into seven books and the first one has the title *Boy and Girl*. It is so because this book is about Maggie's and Tom's childhood. In this book, we learn about their affective connection. In a caring way, Tom refers to his sister as "Magsie". We also discover

about Maggie's deep fraternal love towards her brother: he is clearly her favourite person in the world. "I love Tom so dearly, Luke - better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together. I can tell him everything he doesn't know" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 31), she tells her father's head miller.

On the other hand, *Boy and Girl* also brings indications of the strong contrasts between Maggie and her brother from early childhood, which are crucial to the unravelling of the novel. If when we first meet Maggie we are told that she is a mistake of nature, when we first meet Tom the narrator informs us he is "one of those lads that grow everywhere in England" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 34). It is the first evidence in the book that he is part of the society he lives in, the first opposition between brother and sister we find out - and as the chapters advance, the initial contrasts become more and more evident.

Whereas Maggie is a deeply inventive girl, Tom has no sense of imagination and disapproves of Maggie's dreamy character. In one of her avid conversations with her brother, the girl engages in imaginative remarks. "Oh, how brave you are, Tom! I think you're like Samson. If there came a lion roaring at me, I think you'd fight him, wouldn't you, Tom?" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 35). But the boy does not follow. "How can a lion come roaring at you, you silly thing? There's no lions, only in the shows" (ibidem). Tom does not like to imagine things that are not real or not likely to happen. He regards it as a waste of time. This is an early example of his narrow-minded worldview.

But what stands out in his personality is his assertive sense of justice.

Tom was only thirteen, and had no decided views in grammar and arithmetic, regarding them for the most part as open questions, but he was particularly clear and positive on one point, - namely, that he would punish everybody who deserved it. Why, he wouldn't have minded being punished himself if he deserved it; but, then, he never *did* deserve it (ELIOT, 2012, p. 40).

The boy has a "natural inclination to blame" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 229). When he decides someone did not act properly, he does not hesitate in judging and penalizing them. In a conversation with Maggie about their future, he warns her: "if you're a nasty disagreeable thing I *shall* hate you" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 164). In fact, even when they are only kids he punishes Maggie whenever she acts in a way he condemns.

At the very ending of *The Antigone and its Moral*, Eliot reminds us about the best moral that can be drawn from the clash in the *Antigone* play. She argues that "our protest for the right should be seasoned with moderation and reverence" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 366).

Moderation is exactly what Tom and the society of St. Ogg's as a whole lack in their unmerciful judgments.

In a scene in which his sister forgets to feed his rabbits and lets them die, Tom shows his authoritarian manners towards her: "I don't love you, Maggie. You shan't go fishing with me tomorrow. I told you to go and see the rabbits every day" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 37), he tells her. The boy knows quite well this is a great penalty for his sister, because Maggie is in extreme need of love and affection, especially Tom's.

Thus, from very early in her life, Maggie would endure painful collisions between her peculiar inner nature and the outward reality that was there for her. She does not mean, for example, to make Tom upset. But because she forgets to feed his rabbits and they die, Tom gets angry when he finds out about it. The problem is that "no disparity between intention and action can alter the consequences" (BONAPARTE, 1975, p. 34) because intentions, "like hopes and wishes, [...] do not, cannot, have consequences" (BONAPARTE, 1975, p. 24).

The rabbit episode is certainly a minor childhood example, but it is a first instance of the Aristotelian *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* in the story: Maggie disturbs Tom unintentionally and what follows is a discovery of the fact that produces anger in her brother and leads him to reprimand her. Therefore, it is Tom who achieves an *anagnorisis* in this occasion. However, it is also, in a certain way, a moment of realization for Maggie. The girl subtly learns that her brother can be harsh and punitive, and that he is not a perfect boy in the way she used to exalt him. "O he is cruel!" Maggie sobbed aloud" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 38). She becomes miserable.

Another childhood event that illustrates these two Aristotelian concepts is the one in which Maggie cuts her own hair after hearing so many acid remarks about her appearance. When the girl acts, she expects to free herself from her family's cutting observations about the aspect of her hair, but the effect turns out to be different than the one she intended to produce. Hence it is the genesis of another *peripeteia*.

Maggie felt an unexpected pang. She had thought beforehand chiefly of her own deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it, and something also of the triumph she should have over her mother and her aunts by this very decided course of action: she didn't want her hair to look pretty - that was out of the question - she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl and not to find fault with her. But now when Tom began to laugh at her and say she was like an idiot, the affair had quite a new aspect. She looked in the glass, and still Tom laughed and clapped his hands, and Maggie's flushed cheeks began to pale and her lips to tremble a little (ELIOT, 2012, p. 70).



When her relatives learn about her deed, they have an *anagnorisis*. "Mrs. Tulliver gave a little scream as she saw her [...] Mrs. Tulliver thought there was nothing worse in question than a fit of perverseness which was inflicting its own punishment, by depriving Maggie of half her dinner" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 73). Maggie's aunt censures the girl, saying that "little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water - not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 74). And Maggie also realizes that her action led to a different result than the one she was hoping to cause, hence she reaches an *anagnorisis* as well.

She could see clearly enough now the thing was done that it was very foolish, and that she should have to hear and think more about her hair than ever; for Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but also what would have happened if they had not been done (ELIOT, 2012, p. 71).

Thus, in these early scenes it is already observable that "Maggie was always wishing she had done something different" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 56), because her actions constantly have the opposite effect than the one she expects, like the actions of the Aristotelian tragic hero.

As Maggie grows up, her conflicts grow more intense, especially because she is not capable of behaving the way her social circle, particularly her brother, mother and aunts, wish her to. After an occasion in which Maggie reprehends her aunts for blaming Mr. Tulliver for his downfall, Tom scolds her.

You're always setting yourself up above me and every one else, and I've wanted to tell you about it several times. You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncles and aunts; you should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. You think you know better than any one, but you're almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can (ELIOT, 2012, p. 262-263).

Therefore, the collisions between her passionate nature and the code of behaviour established by her society remain through adulthood.

Maggie indeed tries to renounce her inner needs in order to avoid more strife. She attempts to fulfill social expectations by giving books away and repressing her impulsive manners. Her mother becomes extremely satisfied and amazed at the fact that Maggie "should be 'growing up so good'; it was amazing that this once 'contrairy' child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 329).

The girl is also aware that, once she had chosen to submit, she ought not to see her childhood friend Philip Wakem anymore. Her brother had forbidden her to - "Mind you never speak to Philip again." (ELIOT, 2012, p. 225) - after their father's downfall, on which the Tulliver family blames Philip's father. But the first big struggle Maggie experiences as a grown up woman arises when she ends up meeting Philip again.

I wish we could have been friends,-- I mean, if it would have been good and right for us. But that is the trial I have to bear in everything; I may not keep anything I used to love when I was little. The old books went; and Tom is different, and my father. It is like death. I must part with everything I cared for when I was a child. And I must part with you; we must never take any notice of each other again. That was what I wanted to speak to you for (ELIOT, 2012, p. 338).

Notwithstanding Maggie's explanation, Philip tries to convince her to have regular encounters with him. He argues that it would not do any harm and that they should try to be friends despite their family's enmity. Maggie becomes undoubtedly conflictuous under these thoughts: she would certainly enjoy being with him again. Philip was the one who understood her emotional and intellectual self, who provided her with talks about books, art and music. He admired her, thought her clever, and since she was in need of love and admiration, being with him would allow her to have back some part of the life she had given up.

Even so, Maggie insists she should not meet Philip anymore in order to prevent animosity - "if our secret were discovered, there would be nothing but misery - dreadful anger" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 365), she explains to him. The girl claims she had found great peace in resignation, for things had been denied to her and she thought she ought to accept it. But Philip is vehement in his opinion. For him, such self-denial is but shutting oneself up "in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of nature [...] You are not resigned: you are only trying to stupefy yourself" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 366-367). And he goes on to warn her that "no one has strength given to do what is unnatural [...] You will be thrown into the world someday, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 368).

The chapter closes and when a new one starts it reveals that Maggie and Philip had engaged in regular secret encounters, despite the girl's struggles to renounce their friendship. And when Tom suspects his sister is secretly meeting Philip Wakem, he becomes enraged. For Tom, "a love for a deformed man would be odious in any woman - in a sister intolerable"

(ELIOT, 2012, p. 381). He decides that "if she had been carrying out any kind of intercourse whatever with Philip, a stop must be put to it at once; she was disobeying her father's strongest feelings and her brother's express commands, besides compromising herself by secret meetings" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 381).

And so it happens. This is the first manifestation of the Aristotelian *peripeteia* in Maggie's adult life. Once again, she does not intend to upset her brother - "I don't wish to use deceit" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 382) - and yet Tom's distress is the result of her deed. Intention is different from action. By choosing to meet Philip, she surrenders to her desires, which are crashed by familial restraints. Maggie cannot control the consequences of her choices according to her wishes. And given the circumstances, duty and will cannot be conciliated. Hence, when Tom finds out, anger is aroused, just as in the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*.

Now then Maggie, there are but two courses for you to take: either you vow solemnly to me with your hand on my father's Bible, that you will never hold another meeting or speak another word in private with Philip Wakem, or you refuse, and I tell my father everything, and this month, when by my exertions he might be made happy once more, you will cause him the blow of knowing that you are a disobedient, deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability by clandestine meetings with the son of a man that has helped to ruin her father. Choose! (ELIOT, 2012, p. 383).

Maggie reluctantly obeys her brother and swears she would not meet her friend again. But after Tom humiliates Philip, a sense of indignation takes over her. Brother and sister fall out with each other and Tom closes their conversation with a bitter remark: "You need say no more to show me what a wide distance there is between us" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 389).

As time passes, Mr. Tulliver dies and Tom recovers Dorkcote Mill, which had been lost to Philip's father. Maggie stays at her cousin Lucy's. At this point of the novel, the unravelling of Maggie's tragedy is near. The girl's final *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* are soon to come: they happen after she meets her cousin's suitor, Stephen Guest.

Maggie grows into a striking woman, who looks good even in shabby dresses. It does not take much time for Stephen to fall in love with her and she eventually becomes attracted to him as well. He attempts to persuade her to marry him, but she strives to hold on to her family ties. And it is a greatly painful battle.

O, it is difficult - life is very difficult. It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; - but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us [...] There are things we must renounce

in life - some of us must resign love. Many things are difficult and dark to me - but I see one thing quite clearly - that I must not, cannot seek my happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural - but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I didn't obey them. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned (ELIOT, 2012, p. 506-507).

The feelings at war inside her are becoming more difficult to control. After the scene quoted above, Maggie openly declares her love for Stephen and concludes that giving things up is "so hard now" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 507).

Nonetheless, the girl tries to resist. Yet, her next action is decisive to the denouement of her tragedy: she goes on a boat trip alone with Stephen.

And they went. Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm tender care into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her [...] all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic - and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded (ELIOT, 2012, p. 522).

Notwithstanding the atmosphere of being conducted, Maggie is not forced to go on the boat along with Stephen Guest. In fact, this is an occasion in which she concedes that her passions take over. The girl had decided not to go along with Stephen, but in the end she could not help it: she let him convince her. Memory is excluded because for a moment she does not put her duties before her desire to be with the man she loves. Maggie tried to give Stephen up in the same way she had tried to avoid meeting Philip before. But since she is unable of submitting altogether, it is not possible for her to refuse his invitation. Therefore, in spite of all her struggle, the girl is entirely responsible for her decision.

As mentioned before, in Eliot's deterministic cause-and-effect plots, she "allows neither character nor reader to confuse the desire with the ability to make amends" (BONAPARTE, 1975, p. 25). Maggie continually wishes she could have done differently, but it is not possible to revert what has already been done. And inasmuch as every action has a reasonable consequence, it is not surprising that even though Maggie does not intend to hurt Lucy (and despite her efforts to resist her passions), the boat ride leads to another *peripeteia* and its following *anagnorisis* in the novel.

Before Maggie becomes aware of the fact, she gets farther from home than she had predicted she would ever be on a short boat trip. An argument with Stephen follows and they go back home. In the journey back to St. Ogg's, Maggie reflects upon her deeds and

understands Philip's words back in the Red Deeps, where they used to meet some years before. The girl comes to realize that she was not completely resigned; she was incapable of being so. There were "volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 329) inside her, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not renounce her passions altogether. They always ended up coming back to haunt her. This time, they had come back in Stephen. And now it was "too late not to have caused misery" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 532).

Despite Stephen's insistence, Maggie chooses her duties towards her family over him. She is conscious of the fact that she cannot remove the traces of their elopement. Yet, she is determined not to go any further. Maggie goes home, where she believes she will be "rescued from more falling" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 540). But when she arrives at Dorlcote Mill and looks at Tom, she feels "the hatred in his face" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 546). Although the girl tries to explain the event, her brother is stringent.

You will find no home with me [...] You have disgraced us all - you have disgraced my father's name. You have been a curse to your best friends. You have been base - deceitful - no motives are strong enough to restrain you. I wash my hands on you forever (ELIOT, 2012, p. 546).

This is the final manifestation of the Aristotelian *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* of Maggie's tragedy. Despite her struggles against her feelings and her will not to cause misery, this is the outcome of her being on that boat with Stephen, given the familial restraints. Once again, Maggie's action "veers round to its opposite" (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 15) and when Tom finds out, hatred is produced. When she arrives at Dorlcote Mill, she gets to learn the real effect of her action on Lucy, who gets ill. Maggie had already realized that her deed would generate unhappiness, but now she recognises the proportions it actually acquired.

At Dorlcote Mill, Maggie also comprehends that no matter how hard she tries to explain that nothing really happened between her and Stephen, Tom is not going to believe her. In fact, even the society of St. Ogg's, by that point, hopes Maggie leaves town "as to purify the air of St. Ogg's from the taint of her presence - extremely dangerous to the daughters there!" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 555).

This final process of *peripeteia* followed by *anagnorisis* culminates in Maggie's greatest change of fortune. In the previous instances marked by these Aristotelian events in the novel, Maggie cried, became ashamed, wanted to make amends or suffered with her brother's temporary rejection. But if there were a distance between Tom and her, now she is

absolutely excluded from his life and seen as an immoral woman to the eyes of the society of St Ogg's. The girl is more than ever displaced.

But before Maggie enters another cycle of unintentional wrongdoing, her catastrophe happens: a flood, which results in her death as well as in her brother's.

Maggie had been living with Tom's childhood friend, Bob Jakin, and his wife since her brother had expelled her from his house. Night had already fallen and she had been praying, wondering: "am I to struggle and fall and repent again?" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 582). Suddenly, it strikes her: there is water. The flood is happening.

In her altruistic, sympathetic way, she wakes Bob Jakin up to save his family and goes alone on her boat to rescue Tom and Mrs. Tulliver. When the girl arrives at Dorlcote Mill, her mother is not there, but Tom answers and goes along with her on the boat. After moments of silence, brother and sister are finally reunited and Tom lets a childish "Magsie" slip out of his mouth. But their boat gets stuck in the current and a giant piece of machinery encounters them.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water - and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph [...] The boat reappeared - but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted - living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together (ELIOT, 2012, p. 588).

It is the conclusion Aristotle proposes, for he determines the right ending of the tragedy should be unhappy (ARISTOTLE, 2013, p. 18). The flood, despite providing reunion and affection, is an illustration of the Aristotelian scene of suffering, for it culminates in Tom's and in Maggie's death.

It has been argued that *The Mill on the Floss'* finale is brought about by a "Deus ex machina"<sup>10</sup> - which ought not to happen in tragedy, according to Aristotle. To a certain extent, it is true. The flood works as a symbolic solution for Maggie's conflicts: she is reconciled with her brother once again and does not have to struggle anymore. The cycle ends. On the other

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<sup>10</sup> Although Barbara Hardy does not refer to the ending of the novel by using the term "Deus ex machina", she affirms that "in dying, Maggie is happy at being properly loved, for herself but also in the *magical restoration* of unbidden, and of the lost past" (2006, p. 33 - italics mine) and that *The Mill on the Floss* has a "wish-fulfilling end" (ibidem). Walter Allen's opinion is that Eliot "took the easy way and substituted for a genuine resolution a cliché-ending from the stock of Victorian fiction" (1975, p. 227). Adamson claims that "the deus ex machina of the flood seems the only way of solving the impasse of the novel" (2003, p.330), and that Maggie's "tragic drowning in a bid to rescue her brother, however manipulated an ending to the novel, is an analogous solution" (ibidem).

hand, however, the flood only shows that, as it should be in a tragedy, Maggie's dilemmas would never have a solution had she survived. Thus, in *The Mill on the Floss*, "the narrative leads to a situation in which satisfactory resolution is unattainable in the terms her [George Eliot's] adopted realistic mode would allow" (LEVINE, 1989, p. 45).

Besides that, the flood is not exactly an unlikely device that comes out of the blue. There are several indications of previous floods in the area throughout the novel. In a conversation with his friend Bob Jakin, Tom reminds him that "there was a big flood once when the Round Pool was made [...] and the sheep and cows were all drowned, and the boats went all over the fields ever such a way" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 53). And the Tulliver family had already faced the consequences of floods before.

The Tullivers had lived on this spot for generations, and he [Mr. Tulliver] had sat listening on a low stool on winter evenings while his father talked of the old half-timbered mill that had been there before the last great floods, which damaged it so that his grandfather pulled it down and built a new one (ELIOT, 2012, p. 296).

Hence, when the flood strikes in Maggie's tragedy, there are earlier indications which help create an atmosphere of non-magical device.

## 5.2 MAGGIE TULLIVER AS A TRAGIC HEROINE

"It's time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time - the heart and spirit of the average man."  
(Arthur Miller, *Tragedy and the Common Man*)

In the epigraph that opens this section, the thread of our history to which Miller (1949) refers is tragedy. In her essay *The Antigone and its Moral*, George Eliot rejects the claim that tragedy is not compatible with the modern context. In her novel *The Mill on the Floss*, she illustrates through Maggie Tulliver what she had already explained in her essay: the struggle in Sophocle's play represents the battles between man's inner needs and his outer life.

Although Maggie is not an illustrious character in the sense that the Aristotelian tragic hero is, this does not prevent her from being a tragic heroine.

Insistence upon the rank of the tragic hero, or the so-called nobility of his character, is really but a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy. If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king (MILLER, 1949).

The tragedy Eliot writes is not in its formal aspects: it is in its essence. Her ideas expressed in *The Antigone and its Moral* are in harmony with Miller's conception of the tragic collision. The central problems of tragedy are not particular to kings and gods, and thus the common men and women are certainly apt to take part in tragedy. Bonaparte argues that size is

a matter of perspective. For Eliot who, like Miller, is concerned with asserting the tragedy of common life, the difference between great and petty is a difference in perception. Eliot was one of the first writers to wrest tragedy from the stronghold of elitism and concede it to the democratized future of the average man (BONAPARTE, 1975, xiii).

In her novels, Eliot creates heroes and heroines who belong among the average mortals. Adam Bede is a hardworking carpenter who lives with his mother and brother. He learns throughout his life to moderate his harsh judgements towards others and to adjust his perception of the ones around him. This happens especially after his father's death and, later, after his disenchantment regarding his beloved Hetty - whom he used to consider perfect.

In *Middlemarch*, the protagonist is Dorothea Brooke, a benevolent but stubborn girl who initially lives with her uncle. Like Maggie, she is passionate and hungry for knowledge, but constantly deluded and frustrated and cannot seem to be satisfied. Dorothea faces the difficulties of an impulsive marriage and, after her husband's death, finds herself faced with a codicil added by him to his will, which determined the girl must not be married to Will Ladislaw - under the consequence of losing her husband's properties.

Romola is the altruistic daughter of a "moneyless, blind old scholar" (ELIOT, 1999, p. 50). She cannot bear her failing marriage and attempts to leave town twice but ends up coming back to fulfill her duties. Even though *Romola* is set in the fifteenth-century Florence, the protagonist's dilemmas are the same as the ones faced by the other heroes and heroines: she undergoes conflicts between her inner sense of morality and the moral rules of her society.

With Maggie, it is not different: her father is the ruined owner of a mill and she leads an ordinary life. Even so, as illustrated in the previous section of this work, the girl is continually under moral tensions and painful clashes between her inward needs and external laws. Thus, the commonness of George Eliot's heroes and heroines does not prevent them



from going through the tragic struggles that belonged to highly renowned characters in the Aristotelian theory of tragedy.

Moreover, because Eliot is impartial, her characters could not be utterly evil or perfect. They are human beings liable to commit errors and subject to a variety of feelings. They act according to the circumstance they have to face. Maggie, for example, tends to be very altruistic and sympathetic throughout the novel. She frequently takes the feelings of those around her into consideration. When she decides not to go further and gives Stephen up, she thinks about his feelings too. And at the same time, it is her sympathy towards her cousin Lucy that keeps her from having any type of intercourse with the young man.

But, on the other hand, Maggie is far from being perfect. As a young girl, she would act impulsively out of jealousy. In one of these situations, she pushes Lucy into the mud under the thoughts that "she should like to make Lucy cry by slapping or pinching her, especially as it might vex Tom" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 110). In this occasion, she was jealous of her brother who ignored her and treated Lucy so well.

The mud episode is a childhood scene, but as Maggie grows up, she is still susceptible to selfish thoughts every now and then, even though they do not predominate. There were moments "in which a cruel selfishness seemed to be getting possession of her; why should not Lucy, why should not Philip, suffer? *She* had had to suffer through many years of her life; and who had renounced anything for her?" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 516). Maggie is, therefore, a human being full of human feelings, but with a strong tendency to be sympathetic and altruistic - in contrast with her increasingly selfish society.

However, even if Maggie is not absolutely perfect, her downfall does not come due to vice and malignity: it could not be so in Eliot's universe. In this sense, she is in consonance with the Aristotelian tragic hero, for the philosopher claims that character is subsidiary to action. In other words, a villain would not be an appropriate tragic hero because the misfortune of such character could not produce pity and fear.

Given that character is subsidiary to action, Maggie's nature is decisive to the springing of the tragic collision in the novel. Besides the clash "between the inward impulse and the outward fact" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 309), the girl is the battlefield for interior conflicts as well. Internal dilemmas emerge from her natural inclination to be sympathetic. It is not simple for her to choose one thing over the other: whichever path she takes, she is going to be hurt.

The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed - she had brought sorrow into the lives of others - into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love. The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried into the sins her nature had most

recoiled from - breach of faith and cruel selfishness; she had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion. And where would that lead her? - where had it led her now? She had said she would rather die than fall into that temptation. She felt it now - now that the consequences of such a fall had come before the outward act was completed [...] for could she ever cease to see before her Lucy and Philip with their murdered trust and hopes? (ELIOT, 2012, p. 531).

In other words, her dilemmas cannot be completely solved. The girl does not want to simply fulfill her inward passions, for she will not be happy in case she breaks the ties to her family. Maggie is attracted to Stephen, but as she tells him, she could never consent to being with him with her "whole heart and soul" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 537). Similarly, she had told Philip she desired "no future that will break the ties of the past" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 499). Thus, the valid claims that collide in the novel exist not only in Tom's and in Maggie's side, but they also coexist inside the girl, and she is torn between them. This is what makes her dilemmas acquire tragic insoluble proportions.

In fact, like the Aristotelian tragic hero, Maggie brings her own adversity by reason of a tragic flaw. According to Miller,

the tale always reveals what has been called his tragic flaw, a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing--and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status (MILLER, 1949).

In Maggie's case, it is not unwillingness but incapability to remain passive. The girl even attempts to remain so, but it is not possible. In order to remain passive, Maggie would have to thoroughly renounce her nature. But as Philip foreshadows in one of their talks in the Red Deeps, it is unnatural to enclose her inward needs, so that they always come back eventually. Hence her tragic flaw is her very incapability of submitting – which is a facet of her character.

When her inability of remaining passive collides with social and familial expectations, there is an appropriate environment for tragedy. After all, "Character' - says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms - 'character is destiny'. But not the whole of our destiny" (ELIOT, 2012, p. 451), as the narrator of the novel informs us. The tragedy in Maggie's life does not exist solely on the grounds that she is incapable of submitting, but because this aspect of her character clashes with the outward fact. "For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within" (ibidem).

Another point to be considered in Maggie's tragic conflicts is that both sides represent valid principles. Even the representatives of duties, the ones who act like a constraint for the

girl's desires, are in fact simply defending their own values and have to be regarded in the context they are placed.

If Tom rebukes his sister, it is because he does what he assumes to be the right thing to do.

Poor Tom! he judged by what he had been able to see: and the judgement was painful enough to himself. He thought he had the demonstration of facts observed through years by his own eyes which gave no warning of their imperfection, that Maggie's nature was utterly untrustworthy and too strongly marked with evil tendencies to be safely treated with leniency: he would act on that demonstration at any cost - but the thought of it made his days bitter to him. Tom, *like every one of us, was imprisoned within the limits of his own nature* (ELIOT, 2012, p. 564 - italics mine).

The boy is not evil and heartless. Like Creon, Antigone and Maggie, he is only "contending for what he believes to be the right" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 365). His pride and sense of justice are the guidance of his actions, and, as the narrator of the novel reminds us, Tom acts according to the limits of his nature. The same applies to Maggie's aunts and mother. Mrs. Tulliver's dullness make her recriminate the girl's appearance and behaviour. It is the same facet of Bessy's nature that leads her to cry over her lost china and furniture - her personal treasure. But this does not mean she is cruel towards Maggie. In fact, when Tom dislodges his sister, Mrs. Tulliver stands by her.

This is why we argue that Bayer (1979) diverges from Eliot's own conception of tragedy. As mentioned in the second chapter, it is not the researcher's intention to do an analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* as a tragic work. Nevertheless, she does refer to Maggie as tragic heroine. Thereupon, when Bayer suggests that Maggie is the one to blame in her tragedy, she seems to forget that there has to be validity in both sides: Maggie's and her family's.

Because George Eliot's tragic heroine is a common girl who is neither evil nor perfect but experiences struggles that are part of the tragic human condition, there is a suitable scenario for the Aristotelian *catharsis* - that is, for effecting pity and fear. But pity and fear are not exactly the effect Eliot wants to evoke with the tragedy she writes. In a letter quoted by Anger (2001), George Eliot writes:

If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that *opinions* are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact

of being struggling, erring, human creatures (ELIOT *apud* ANGER, 2001, p. 82).

This is a reasonable justification for creating a tragic heroine who is a common girl. If Eliot intends that her reader imagines and feels the conflicts her characters endure, there has to be a sense of familiarity. And as the writer herself specifies, such familiarity may exist on the grounds that, just like her readers, Eliot's heroes and heroines are "struggling, erring, human creatures". This explains why the novelist refuses the idea that tragedy is not compatible with modern sympathies: if gods and kings are no longer able to entice human sympathy, ordinary people may be.

## 6 CONCLUSION

As we point out in the second chapter, Bayer argues that Maggie is incapable of achieving "complete harmony between her inner self and the external world" (BAYER, 1979, p. 70). In fact, the heroine could not possibly have reached such harmony in a novel that restores the conflict of the Greek tragedy. Quite the contrary, the existence of a tragic collision which is the central point of the novel means that harmony is impossible to be attained. As we demonstrate in our analysis, the elemental forces that collide in Maggie's tragedy are precisely the girl's inner self and her external world.

From the analysis of *The Mill on the Floss*, we can conclude that the clash of valid claims which holds the substance of tragedy according to Eliot appears in the plot of the novel: it is the collision between Maggie's duties and her inner needs. The girl has several choices to make throughout her life - she needs to decide between her love for books, her thirst for knowledge, her fierce will to be an active woman and an appropriate code of behaviour; between Philip and her responsibility towards her family; between Stephen and her respect for her cousin Lucy. Hence, when Adamson (2003) argues that shame is the central force in Maggie's misfortune, he seems to disregard the key point of Eliot's tragedy. It is actually the heroine's inward and outward insoluble confrontations that constitute the pivotal force in her tragedy.

Through Maggie's conflicts, Eliot promotes reflection on moral responsibility in human relations, as she often does in her works. As George Eliot's contemporaries recognized, "her thought on morality is crucial to all her work, which repeatedly takes up questions about right action, responsibility, and how one should live one's life" (ANGER, 2001, p. 79). The dilemmas Maggie goes through have the same basis of those faced by Romola, Dorothea Brooke and Adam Bede, for example - as commented throughout this study. Thus, the analysis of the theme of tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss* may throw some light on Eliot's body of work as whole: we are able to perceive indications of the tragic conflict as a unity in her fiction, even though manifested different degrees in each novel.

Because of her realist project, the incidents of George Eliot's novels follow a sequence of cause and effect - just like the Aristotelian complex plot of tragedy. Her characters do not have the power to control the consequences of their actions and decisions. The effects happen

according to the laws of probability, for Eliot adopts the direct observation of her object to be represented.

the fictional world becomes for Eliot bound to the real one in two vital ways. The influence of the fictional world was “inevitably” in the real one” [...] the fictional world allows the reader no possible escape from the reality of his own life; quite the contrary, in fact, it was necessary that it reflect that life so intensely that the reader could not ignore in fiction what he might have managed to ignore in fact. It was thus Eliot concluded that since fiction had its effect in real life, real life had to be too subject of fiction (BONAPARTE, 1975, p.3).

Hence the novelist's option for the empirical method makes it inevitable for her to expose the tragic dilemmas she considered immanent in human condition. And this is why tragedy becomes convenient for her moral and aesthetic concerns.

For this reason, Eliot's model of realism would not allow the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* to be thoroughly a wish-fulfilling one. A character like Maggie Tulliver could not possibly have her conflicts solved by magical restoration. Therefore, even though the flood puts an end to Maggie's struggles in a symbolic way, it also confirms what Levine (1989, p. 45) points out: satisfactory resolution cannot be achieved. In other words, Maggie's situation is irrevocably tragic.

George Eliot updates the Aristotelian tragic hero by creating an ordinary heroine. Like Aristotle's hero, Maggie has a tragic flaw - her incapability of submitting. And as we explain in our analysis, this is not the only element in the genesis of Maggie's tragedy. But given that her nature collides with the external fact, there is an appropriate scenario for the tragic conflict, despite Maggie's lack of nobility. Hence, by wresting tragedy from the domain of renowned characters, George Eliot makes tragedy suitable for the modern public.

As for the incidents of the plot (the chief part of tragedy according to Aristotle), we can observe that the structure of Maggie's journey is in conformity with the one proposed in the *Poetics*. There is a pattern in the sequences of event: whenever Maggie's acts have an undesired effect, there is a manifestation of the Aristotelian *peripeteia*. In the beginning of her life, though, the examples of *peripeteia* result in childish quarrels between brother and sister or in shame produced by an impulsive and miscalculated haircut. But as the story moves forward, such moments become more complicated and the following *anagnorisis* is stronger, until Maggie's tragic conflicts achieve gigantic proportions. It is like a vicious cycle: the girl cannot contain her nature anymore, acts in a way that produces distress, repents, but it is too

late - and so she suffers with the consequences. Eventually, such cycle culminates in a great change of fortune and her tragedy ends with a scene of suffering.

Therefore, even though George Eliot makes a departure from the formal features of the classic tragedy, the general structure of the Aristotelian complex plot is maintained. The novelist does not write tragedy as a genre, but the paramount elements of the tragedy - the clashes in the plot and the existence of a tragic hero - are there, as demonstrated in the fifth chapter of this work. In the plot, the Aristotelian elements can be evinced too - *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, change of fortune and scene of suffering. The difference is that, in opposition to what happens in the Greek tragedy, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* appear more than once. This possibly happens on the grounds that, in Aristotle's theory, the incidents of the tragedy should happen within twenty-four hours whereas the events in George Eliot's novel go on through Maggie's entire life.

Regardless of this difference, the essence of the tragedy – that is, the clash between valid principles – is what holds the substance of the *The Mill on the Floss* as well. Thus, when Bonaparte (1975) claims that Eliot's novels are strictly Aristotelian, it is not an exaggeration: although Eliot updates the classic concept of tragedy and modifies it to suit a novel in modern times, her basis of tragedy is Aristotelian.

Based on these findings, we can argue that tragedy is the fundamental issue in the novel. As Bonaparte observes,

the tragedy Eliot writes is to be found in the informing concept out of which the novels grow; like the causal connection between events which is so central a part of Eliot's fiction, the tragedy cannot be seen but must be inferred. It is there, in the novels, but it is there not as are the individual parts of the novels but as the order that binds them together. (BONAPARTE, 1975, xi)

Inasmuch as Eliot does not recreate tragedy as a genre, it is possible to claim that the novelist contributes to the English novel in the sense that she combines two genres that were considered to be distinct: tragedy and novel. She appropriates and updates the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and incorporates it to the novel. According to Bakhtin, this is possible because of the plasticity of the novel, which is "a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review" (BAKHTIN, 2000, p. 330).

If the incorporation of tragedy to the novel is possible, there is one more justification for Eliot's rejection of the statement that tragedy is "foreign to modern sympathies" (ELIOT, 1990a, p. 363). Compared to other genres, such as the epic and the tragic ones, the novel is a

young genre.<sup>11</sup> It is compatible with the modern audience, and not obsolete and completed as these other genres are considered. Once observed that tragedy can fit into a young genre, we can understand why Eliot's update of tragedy makes it suitable for modern sympathies: it is so due to the very fact that she does not recreate tragedy as a genre, but restores it within the novel - a genre that is not archaic.

In this sense, we may also observe a certain anticipation of the modernist trend in Eliot's fiction. In his novels *A portrait of the artist as a young man* ([1916]1996) and *Ulysses* ([1922]2010), James Joyce appropriates and incorporates the epic. In *A portrait of the artist* (JOYCE, 1996), this phenomenon happens in a subtler way: Joyce only restores the idea of the epic through Dedalus. In *Ulysses* (JOYCE, 2010), the appropriation of the epic is clearer and its incorporation to the novel manifests itself in a structural parallel. By appropriating and modifying a tradition of a distant past, Joyce breaks with the traditions of the novel existing in his time too.

Needless to say, Eliot's incorporation of the concept of tragedy - half a century before the publication of Joyce's novels - follows the same principle. She not only appropriates the classic tragedy, she updates it. Eliot performs a modification of both tragedy and novel as they had existed hitherto: she rethinks the conventions of both genres. And in embodying a so-called old genre to her novel, the novelist demonstrates her "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (ELIOT, 1920)<sup>12</sup>. This is, for T.S. Eliot, "what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (ibidem).

It is in this sense that the disruptions we are able to find in the works of modernist authors can be subtly announced in Eliot too. Subtly, because Eliot promotes no grand transformations in the form of the novel as the innovative structural devices and temporal aspects found in Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, for example. Even so, the incorporation of tragedy to the novel is one of George Eliot's contributions to the transformations of the English novel.

The limitations of time and space in the development of this study precludes a deeper analysis of the matter. Thus, the relationship between George Eliot and the modernist writers,

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<sup>11</sup> See WATT, 2000 and BAKHTIN, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> The online version of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* we rely on in this work has no numbered pages to be cited.



as well as the impact of her incorporation of tragedy to the English novel, remain an interesting reflection for further investigation.

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