

MARRIAGE NEEDS SEX AND SOME:

Desire in *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Odd Women*

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The *OED* defines “Victorian” as “prudish, strict; old-fashioned, out-dated.” This string of disheartening adjectives reflects the common pejorative stereotype of nineteenth century Britain as stuffy and sexually repressed. Like many stereotypes, this one has some basis in fact: standards of public morality were stricter then than now, and literary representations of sexuality often consisted more of hints or suggestions than graphic specifics. It was also widely asserted that sexual desire, while natural for men, was not so in women. In this essay, Mollie Winter explores how Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and Gissing’s *The Odd Women* confront these ideas about sexual desire and its place in literature and life. Both novels present their heroines with choices between men who offer love without desire and men who arouse physical passion. In both cases, the first option is shown to be clearly inadequate. But lust also turns out to be highly problematic: while passion may be essential to a happy union, it can also override other important principles. The ideal relationship would seem to be one that balances these different needs, but neither novel provides us with a happy ending that reflects this possibility. Why not? Is it perhaps marriage itself that cannot accommodate the realities of desire? Certainly any novel that raises such a question is anything but stuffy.

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Conventional Victorian thinking concerning sexuality tended to treat sexual desire as natural for men but unnatural for women, who were widely seen as asexual, their passion understood to be awakened only by their husbands, if ever. George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* upset this model by suggesting that sexual desire is natural for both men and women, as seen through the hold that passion has upon both of their female protagonists. *The Odd Women* examines the situation of unmarried women in the late nineteenth century by focusing on the lives of the Madden sisters, who are left unprepared for independence by an old-fashioned father, while also presenting us with the contrasting figure of Rhoda Nunn, who is determined to foster a new age for independent women. *The Mill on the Floss* follows Maggie Tulliver as she grows to be a woman who can neither completely satisfy nor reject the ideals of both her family and the small town of St. Oggs. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie almost betrays her beloved cousin, the fair heroine Lucy Deane, because of her physical attraction to Lucy's suitor, Stephen Guest. The effects of sexual desire are similarly explored in *The Odd Women*, as Rhoda nearly abandons her progressively feminist ideals by marrying Everard Barfoot

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to satisfy her passionate feelings for him. The other romantic relationships that Maggie and Rhoda have throughout the texts, namely Maggie's with Philip Wakem and Rhoda's with Mr. Smithson - both of which are morally less problematic - are not completely satisfying either. Through the sense of insufficiency that we detect in all of these relationships, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Odd Women* both suggest that, while it is natural and crucial for women to experience sexual desire alongside men, passion is far from the most important consideration when it comes to marriage.

Maggie's conflicted feelings for Philip, the son of her father's adversary, expose the importance of sexual desire in a romantic relationship. As a child, Maggie visits the home of Mr. Stelling, her brother Tom's instructor. At the time of her visit, Philip is Mr. Stelling's only other pupil. Thus, Philip and Maggie spend a fair amount of time together, and Philip forms quite an attachment to Maggie, saying "I'm very fond of *you*, Maggie; I shall never forget *you*" (Eliot 217). Even though Philip is the son of her father's rival, Maggie returns this sentiment, as can be seen when she tells Philip, "I shall always remember you, and kiss you when I see you again" (218). However, this innocent and childish relationship acquires a different tone

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when Maggie and Philip reunite years later. At this point, their relationship arguably turns into a secret courtship, as Maggie spends time alone with “Philip - the only person who had ever seemed to love her devotedly, as she had always longed to be loved,” despite having been forbidden to be friendly with him because “he’s got his father’s blood in him” (391; 218). When Philip confesses to Maggie that he is in love with her, she replies, “I am so surprised, Philip - I had not thought of it” (349). Maggie claims that she loves him, telling him, “I think I could hardly love any one better: there is nothing but what I love you for” (350). And yet, she also claims that while her and Philip’s time together “has been very sweet . . . it has made [her] restless” (350). Her claim suggests that their relationship is lacking in some respect. Could it be that Maggie is not physically attracted to Philip? Clearly, Philip is not an ideal suitor for Eliot’s protagonist. Maggie’s lack of attraction for him is seen through her begging him that they remain “brother and sister in secret, as [they] have been,” as well as through her mode of ardently pitying him, and through his often being compared to a woman: “Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love - like a woman’s” (351; 352). Eliot presents Maggie’s lack of sexual

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desire for Philip as problematic, illustrating how a romantic relationship between the two could never be fully satisfactory, a concept that becomes further apparent when Maggie and Stephen's relationship blossoms. Perhaps it is only due to the determinism of the novel that when Maggie is awakened to the possibility of a lover other than Philip, she tries to remain loyal to her heart's first conquest.

Rhoda's relationship with Mr. Smithson in *The Odd Women* similarly demonstrates that physical attraction is one of many critical aspects of a romantic relationship. Rhoda's first vaguely romantic attachment is to Mr. Smithson, a radical widower with whom she falls in love when she is fifteen. Gissing presents this information in such a way that establishes Rhoda as a passionate character early on in the text, setting up a foundation for Rhoda to experience great feeling, and allowing the reader to know that, even while she appears to be without sexual desire when she is reintroduced partway through the novel, passion is clearly within her capabilities. However, Rhoda's relationship with Mr. Smithson is devoid of sexual desire: when Rhoda is attracted to him, it is due to his radical ideas, and she does not allow her passion to consume her thoughts, as "study for examinations occup[ies] most of her day[s]" (Gissing 33). In fact, when Miss Barfoot inquires

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whether Rhoda has “been in love with any man” since she was fifteen, Rhoda responds, “Thank heaven, no” (81). Furthermore, Gissing does not present the dissolution of Rhoda’s early attachment to Mr. Smithson as a tragic affair. An older Rhoda approaches the idea of marriage as only “pardonable in very weak people,” and her relationship with Mr. Smithson is presented as solely founded on respect and shared intellect (205). This unregretful attitude toward her former love suggests that a romantic relationship without a trace of sexual desire cannot be a perfect union.

Despite working to further depict sexual desire as an important characteristic of a romantic relationship, the final outcome of Maggie and Stephen’s passionate affair demonstrates that lust is not enough to ensure a happy union. Maggie reacts strongly when she first encounters Stephen, despite having been previously convinced that he was “inclined to be satirical . . . and rather conceited,” and despite knowing that Lucy, her fair and beloved cousin, is attached to him: “There was a new brightness in [Maggie’s] eyes, and a very becoming flush on her cheek, as she seated herself” (Eliot 386; 385). As Maggie and Stephen’s relationship progresses, it becomes evident that often Maggie’s only response to Stephen’s words and actions is

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also “the only appropriately Victorian response - . . . to blush: a signally passive, almost wholly involuntary reaction” (Mitchell 19). This blush suggests that Maggie’s body simply cannot help but react to Stephen. In fact, Maggie blushes three times during their first encounter alone and, as he catches her hand when she slips disembarking from a boat, Eliot reveals the newfound pleasure Maggie experiences due to her physical attraction to him: “It was very charming to be taken care of in that kind graceful manner by some one taller and stronger than one’s self. Maggie had never felt just in the same way before” (Eliot 392). Judith Mitchell claims that what Maggie feels for Stephen is solely the result of “sexual infatuation” as seen through her “involuntary reaction[s]” (17; 19). Maggie’s unbidden physical reactions become stronger as the novel proceeds, as seen through her inability to deny Stephen’s attention and fully abhor his company. This physical attraction is apparent even when he behaves completely inappropriately, such as when a “mad impulse seize[s] on Stephen; he dart[s] toward [Maggie’s] arm, and shower[s] kisses on it, clasping the wrist,” or when he imprudently intrudes upon her visit to her Aunt Moss’s home (Eliot 447). On this latter occasion, Maggie is unable to deny him “one kiss - and then a long

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look,” even after she begs him to leave (454). However, even with the evidently strong and consuming feelings that Maggie has for Stephen, there is something amiss about their relationship, something even beyond the fact that its existence is a form of betrayal toward Lucy. Perhaps this supposition is drawn from the fact that, as Mitchell argues, “Maggie’s desire is reactive, a desire to submit” (22). Maggie is submitting to and refusing Stephen’s advances rather than actively longing to pursue him on her own. The powerful qualities of Maggie’s sexual attraction to Stephen come to a climax when her passion for him does not let her rest easy once she decides not to marry him, and instead to return home: “Involuntarily she leaned toward him and put out her hand to touch his” (Eliot 481). Here it is important to note that her passion for Stephen is what allows him to take her away from home in the first place. When Maggie returns to St. Ogg’s, she finds that her community has formed an unfavourable opinion of the situation, in which Stephen is only considered “rather pitiable,” while Maggie is considered disgraced (489). Maggie reflects upon how she should never have let herself be ruled by the impulse of the moment, saying, “If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without

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the joy of love” (479). While it may be natural for women to experience sexual desire, it is not acceptable to allow those feelings to be the sole basis of a relationship, as is brutally illustrated through Maggie’s death; although Maggie is arguably innocent, Eliot offers her protagonist no true form of recovery, choosing instead to kill her in a flood, even after Maggie sorrowfully yet adamantly rejects Stephen.

The ultimate conclusion of Rhoda and Everard’s amorous relationship demonstrates how Gissing also suggests that sexual desire is insufficient for a healthy union, despite its importance in a romantic relationship. Physical attraction is mentioned immediately when Rhoda first encounters Everard, and Rhoda’s interest in Everard seems to largely stem from his different treatment of her: “The man’s presence affected her with a perturbation . . . [it] made her feel as if she had to learn herself anew, to form a fresh conception of her personality” (Gissing 164). While Rhoda and Everard’s relationship initially seems to bloom only due to Everard’s confession that there “would be something piquant in making vigorous love to Miss Nunn, just to prove her sincerity,” the pair eventually experiences true feelings of at least a sexual nature for one another (Gissing 115). This desire is seen both when

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Rhoda laughs “mockingly, and trie[s] to draw away her hand, for it was burnt by the heat of [Everard’s],” and when Rhoda and Everard argue over their relationship and “consciousness [is] lost for them as their mouths cl[i]ng together, and their hearts [throb] like one” (195; 272). Although Rhoda and Everard enter into an engagement of sorts, it ends when Rhoda hears that Everard may have had relations with another woman and, even when it is revealed that Everard is not guilty as Rhoda initially imagines, Rhoda and Everard do not end up marrying. Lorelee MacPike argues that “the conflict between the male desire to control women’s actions and the New Woman’s need to define the institutions she will participate in” sparks their relationship, but also, ultimately, destroys it (382). However, it is not entirely devastating that Rhoda and Everard do not end up together, that Gissing concludes his novel by having Rhoda reject her sexual desire in favour of continuing as a promoter of the “New” or “Odd Woman.” It is not devastating because we have come to realize that their relationship’s only real foundation was sexual desire.

Despite conventional Victorian assumptions that women did not, or should not, experience sexual desire, *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Odd Women* expose the need for sexual desire to be experienced by both partners

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for a happy union to exist. The novels also suggest that physical attraction is only one part of the complex whole that defines a healthy romantic relationship. Through Maggie's relationship with Philip, and Rhoda's with Mr. Smithson, the novels show that relationships without sexual desire are inadequate. Yet, while Eliot and Gissing acknowledge passion and present it as natural and necessary, passion alone does not prove enough for their protagonists. While the attraction between both Maggie and Stephen, and Rhoda and Everard is so powerful it is practically tangible, if Eliot and Gissing had allowed their female protagonists to completely submit to their sexual desires and marry their compelling suitors, the results would not have been truly gratifying. Through the transitional figures of Maggie and Rhoda, who are neither able to completely conform to nor challenge the societal ideals illustrated throughout *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Odd Women*, Eliot and Gissing both expose the need for a better way for feminism and romance to harmonize - the need for a new ideal.

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