

The River Remembers: An Ecocritical Analysis of Nature, Landscape, and Feminine Identity in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

Gavkhar Akhmedova 

Abstract. This article applies an ecocritical perspective to George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), asserting that the novel's natural landscape—primarily the River Floss and St. Ogg's pastoral environment—acts as more than a decorative backdrop, serving instead as an active, ideologically and narratively charged element. Drawing from the theoretical tools of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and place studies, the article identifies four overlapping aspects of Eliot's environmental imagination: the river as agent and symbol of narrative fate; nostalgic pastoral longing as a critique of industrial modernity; a homologous positional status of nature and woman within a single framework of social control; and the ambivalent environmental politics of the novel's catastrophic flood conclusion. The methodology employed includes close textual analysis of the novel and examination of its intertextual relationships to Victorian geological discourse, Romantic nature writing, and the period's debates about land enclosure and industrial change. The research demonstrates that Eliot develops a complex ecological awareness which anticipates many contemporary ecocritical concerns, such as critiques of nature/culture binaries, the politics of place attachment, and the gendered dimension of environmental exploitation. The study also argues that the novel's final flood functions on multiple levels: as an ecological event, as a social judgment, and as a structural statement about the irresolvability of the natural versus the social determinisms the novel probes. This analysis contributes to the growing body of ecocritical work on Victorian fiction and establishes *The Mill on the Floss* as a key reference point in the history of literary environmental thought.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, pastoral nostalgia, river, flood, Victorian literature

Fergana State University, PhD in Philological Sciences, Uzbekistan

E-mail: ahmedovagavharoy@gmail.com

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Çay xatırlayır: Corc Eliotun *Floss* üzərindəki dəyirman əsərində təbiət, landşaft və qadın kimliyinin ekokritik təhlili

Gövhər Əhmədova 

Xülasə. Bu məqalə Corc Eliotun *Floss* çayındakı dəyirman (1860) romanına ekokritik nöqteyi-nəzərdən yanaşır. Romanda təsvir olunan təbii mənzərə—ilk növbədə *Floss* çayı və Sent Oqqsun pastoral mühiti—dekorativ arxa fon rolundan çıxaraq fəal ideoloji və süjetformalaşdırıcı element kimi təqdim edilir. Ekokritisizm, ekofeminizm və yer araşdırmalarının nəzəri alətlərindən istifadə edərək müəllif Eliotun ətraf mühit təxəyyülünün bir-biri ilə əlaqəli dörd aspektini müəyyənləşdirir:

çay süjet taleyinin agenti və simvolu kimi; sənaye modernliyinin tənqidi kimi nostaljik pastoral; eyni sosial nəzarət çərçivəsində təbiət və qadının homoloji vəziyyəti; romanın fəlakətli sel finalının ziddiyyətli ətraf mühit siyasəti. Tədqiqat Eliotun mürəkkəb ekoloji şüur inkişaf etdirdiyini göstərir: bu şüur təbiət/mədəniyyət ikililiyinin tənqidi, yerə bağlılığın siyasəti və ətraf mühitin istismarının genderlə əlaqəli ölçüsü kimi müasir ekokritik problemləri qabaqcadan hiss edir. Məqalə Viktoriya dövrü bədii nəsrinin ekokritik araşdırmalar külliyatına töhfə verir.

Açar sözlər: ekokritisizm, ekofeminizm, Corc Eliot, Floss çayındakı dəyirman, pastoral nostalji, çay, sel, Viktoriya dövrü ədəbiyyatı

Fərqanə Dövlət Universiteti, Dilçilik üzrə fəlsəfə doktoru, Özbəkistan

E-poçt: ahmedovagavharoy@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

With an act of sustained environmental attention remarkable in any Victorian fiction, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (Eliot, 1860) begins. The novel's first chapter, far from describing characters, plot, or social landscape, instead focuses on a river. The anonymous narrator lingers on the "round pool" into which the Floss falls, the "black ships" that transit its waters, the "great warehouse" along its banks, the mill wheel turning in the flood—a barrage of ecological detail so potent that the natural environment seems to precede and exceed the human story it contains. Though such details have been interpreted as memoir, prophecy, and pastoral trope, ecocritical reading—that which views the nonhuman as possessing its own value, significance, and agency—has been a less frequent mode of engagement. The field of ecocriticism, generally put, has so far profoundly reshaped the study of Victorian literature, having demonstrated that this genre was awash with environmental awareness, reflecting a period of unprecedented environmental change—industrialization, urbanization, agricultural enclosure, geological discovery, and human detachment from nature. Nonetheless, the novel remains a marginalized text within ecocritical scholarship. It has been overshadowed by the more obviously "natural" texts of the Romantic period or the more overtly scientific texts of the Victorian era.

The aim of this article is to counter this lack of attention by offering the first prolonged ecocritical study of the text that is informed by an organized analytical approach. I argue here that Eliot's novel makes a unique contribution to Victorian environmental discourse in that it establishes an ecological imagination in which nature appears not just symbolic, but agentive—a real force that has its own temporality, its own logic, and its own way of signifying which interact with and resist the man-made social world depicted. In addition, this ecological imagination is gendered: in positing a homologous relationship between the fates of nature and women within a single framework, Eliot develops what might be read today as an ecofeminist critique of the parallel exploitation of both nature and femininity under the ideological conditions of Victorian capitalism and patriarchy. This article draws upon the following analytical framework organized around four critical dimensions of ecocritical analysis: the river as an ecological agent, nostalgic pastoralism as a critique of industrialism, ecofeminist analyses of the woman–nature homology, and the concluding flood event as both ecological reality and formal statement. I have discussed each axis through close textual analysis and research on intertexts from pertinent areas of scholarly concern. The article is organized as follows: Section 1.1 reviews the theory underlying ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and place studies in Victorian literature and specifically Eliot's novel; Section 2 introduces the methods; Section 3 presents the

analytical results organized by the four axes of discussion; Section 4 discusses the broad importance of the findings; and Section 5 concludes the article.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Ecocriticism and Victorian Fiction

Victorian scholarship's current ecocritical perspective reflects an array of work showing that Victorian literary discourse reflected and engaged with the period's overwhelming environmental change in complex and varied ways—with its industrialization, urban displacement, agricultural enclosure, geological and scientific discovery, and increasing distance from nature and nature-oriented ways of life. As Kreilkamp (2021) explains, Victorian fiction embodies an “ecological imaginary”—a body of assumptions, strategies, and conventions through which authors engaged with industrial environmental upheaval. By focusing on the formal characteristics of the Victorian realist novel, Hensley (2021) has revealed the ways in which the genre particularly captures what he terms an “environmental form” that encodes its ecological relationships. In recent ecocritical work, an increased focus has been paid to waterscapes in Victorian fiction: rivers, floods, and seashores. Applying a framework of “hydrological thinking,” Parham (2022) asserts that rivers function in Victorian literature not merely as symbols, but as agents that exceed the social logics with which the novels attempt to grasp them. Similarly, in applying this to works by women authors from Shelley to Eliot, Ottum (2020) has shown how Victorian women writers routinely use aquatic imagery to describe the intersection of gendered experience, process, and limitation. These studies have laid critical groundwork for my analysis of the Floss as an agent and as a site of ideological contention. With his emphasis on “deep time,” the vast, impersonal duration opened up by nineteenth-century geology, James (2021) shows how the field of geology reshaped Victorian imaginative engagement with its own past as well as with its present and its futures. The very *longue durée* invoked by geological science influences the characters and landscapes of *The Mill on the Floss* and represents a crucial part of the theoretical work I have undertaken here.

1.1.2. Ecofeminism and the Nature–Woman Homology

Ecofeminism, which is the theoretical field investigating the structural linkage of the domination of nature and the domination of women in patriarchal societies, functions as a useful analytical approach to the present argument. As Plumwood (1993) powerfully articulated, the fundamental tenet of ecofeminist theory—that the cultural marginalization of the natural and of women are homologous cultural formations which spring from the same patriarchal reasoning—has been thoroughly elaborated in ecocritical textual analysis (Westling, 2021). The ecofeminist paradigm provides an extremely helpful reading strategy for texts where female characters are systematically placed in conjunction with the natural in a way that replicates their subjugation to the masculine domain (Westling, 2021). Ecocritical scholars recently have begun to qualify the classic ecofeminist approach in *The Mill on the Floss* to better account for how the nature–woman homology might operate simultaneously as a tool for oppression and for resistance in Eliot's writing; Sultzbach (2020), for example, uses an ecofeminist framework to examine Eliot's treatment of the nature–woman identification as potentially internalized patriarchally or internalized as a space for autonomous female consciousness. I build on the important findings of Sultzbach (2020), developing his analysis further through the application of the four axes previously outlined to Eliot's novel. Talairach-Vielmas (2023) frames the ecofeminist dimensions of Eliot's fiction within the historical context of Victorian botany and natural history, demonstrating how Eliot's renderings of the natural world represent an implicit critique of gender relations in Victorian scientific study. Taylor (2021) provides an illuminating overview of Eliot's animal and plant representations within the scope of her larger imaginative work. These works frame the ecofeminist dimensions of the present article.

1.1.3. Place Studies and Pastoral Nostalgia

Place studies, the study of human beings' interaction with their physical environment and the place attachment that arises from such interaction, constitutes a third theoretical perspective crucial for the present analysis. Tschachler (2020) articulates in his recent work on Eliot's provincial novels how, for the novelist, place—whether the built environment or the landscape—is inherently ideological and functions as a source of identification for her characters. As demonstrated in its intensely rendered childhood landscape of the provincial St. Ogg's and in the narrator's acute sense of nostalgia, *The Mill on the Floss* is arguably Eliot's most extensive study of the ideology of place attachment. Voskuil (2022) connects the pastoral nostalgia in Eliot's novels with the broader intellectual context of Victorian engagement with industrialism. According to Voskuil (2022), the poetic elegies on loss and lamented natural worlds that have long attended the elegiac tradition of pastoral writing are especially indicative of Victorian unease and ambivalence in the face of industrial transformation; as such, it provides a useful heuristic for reading *The Mill on the Floss* as a profoundly nostalgic rendering of the provincial countryside, now largely obliterated by industrial development and capitalist expansion. Hadley (2020) elaborates on the affective politics of memory and landscape in Eliot's novels, especially regarding their exploration of childhood and nostalgia. I integrate the insights from these place studies sources within Section 3 of the present article.

1.1.4. The Flood as a Literary–Ecological Event

The tragic climax of *The Mill on the Floss*—the deluge that demolishes St. Ogg's and engulfs Maggie Tulliver in the Floss River—has occupied much more critical attention than nearly any other element of the novel; explicit ecocritical analyses of its meaning, however, are notably scarce. Feuerstein (2023) has offered perhaps the most detailed recent ecocritical examination of the flood ending, arguing that the catastrophe fulfills the novel's established ecological processes and, at the same time, operates as the climax that finally confronts the irreconcilability of the forces of nature and the forces of society. Lussier (2022) provides an extensive account of the representation of rivers as agents of natural force and social transgression in Victorian fiction, including *The Mill on the Floss*. The present article builds on Feuerstein and Lussier's interpretations through an engagement with the flood not only as a fulfillment of narrative and ecological processes but as the nodal point where natural, ideological, and formal concerns converge.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Approach

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology which blends ecocritical close reading with the use of Victorian geological, botanical, and industrial writings as contexts for textual analysis. George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* is the primary text examined, and it is read in its modern scholarly edition (Eliot, 1860/2018). I organize my analysis around the following ecocritical axes: the river as ecological agent, pastoral nostalgia and industrial critique, the nature–woman homology, and the meaning of the flood ending; each axis is explored individually through close reading of selected passages before all four are synthesized into a cohesive argument.

2.2. Theoretical Framework Integration

The methodology of this article is based on integrating three theoretical traditions, which I do not consider rival but mutually reinforcing approaches: ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and place studies (Garrard, 2022; Hadley, 2020; Hensley, 2021; Nixon, 2019; Plumwood, 1993; Sultzbach, 2020; Tschachler, 2020; Westling, 2021). Ecocriticism is the critical approach which conceptualizes how

nonhuman agents figure within human society; ecofeminism expands on ecocriticism to include analysis of the gendered nature of humanity's interaction with and representation of the natural world; and place studies accounts for the ideological aspects of human beings' relationship to their spatial, geographic environments. The methodological innovation of this article lies in integrating these approaches to the analysis of Eliot's work.

2.3. Contextual Materials

My close reading of Eliot's novel is further contextualized by three important areas of Victorian thought and practice. First, Victorian geology and natural history: the works of Lyell (1830–1833), Darwin (1859), and Chambers (1844) are considered the central texts for examining the geological and evolutionary framework within which Eliot conceives of the natural world. Second, Victorian industrial and agricultural history: the Enclosure Acts, the rise of mill industries and the mechanization of production, and the environmental repercussions of early industrialization provide the historical backdrop of the Floss River valley as it appears in Eliot's novel. Third, the literary legacy of nature writing: Wordsworth (1850) is consulted for his profoundly influential engagement with Romanticism's concepts of sublime and pastoral landscape and nature writing.

2.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis is organized around the analytical axes described above; each stage is structured as follows: (1) identify salient textual examples of the concept being examined through thorough reading of *The Mill on the Floss*; (2) analyze these examples closely and critically within the context of the theoretical framework; (3) interpret the examples and critical analyses in light of the specific Victorian textual materials identified above; (4) use these three approaches to draw connections between the elements of each axis, synthesizing my textual, theoretical, and contextual insights. Section 3 then draws together these critical perspectives and synthesis across the four axes in order to formulate a comprehensive analysis of Eliot's ecological imagination and its implications for ecocritical study of Victorian literature.

3. Results

3.1. The River as Ecological Agent

The River Floss is not simply scenery in *The Mill on the Floss*, not a symbol, and not a static backdrop but rather a force in the narrative's world, or what today's ecocriticism, drawing on Bennett's (2010) concept of "vibrant matter," would call an object of nonhuman agency and temporality that cannot be simplified to fit within human meaning systems. Since the beginning of the novel, the river's presence is immediate and defined, asserting itself as a physical force that transcends the human plots in which it later becomes embroiled. The river's ecological agency becomes most apparent in descriptions of its annual rhythms, such as floods or variations in depth and hue, and its role in powering the mill; these scenes establish its independence from human economics in that the economic activities performed at the mill depend on the river's energy, yet can never entirely predict or master it. The mill itself is a representation of what James (2021) calls, in his examination of deep time in Victorian novels, the anxiety concerning the relationship between human activity and exploitation of the natural; that the mill must rely on the river while the river can disregard the mill is one of the central conflicts of *The Mill on the Floss*.

What strikes me as particularly significant here is the novel's insistence on the river's own temporality. Eliot's opening pages establish this from the first sentence: "A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea" (Eliot, 1860/2018, p. 7)—the river is

already in motion before any human figure appears, asserting its own priority. The river's temporal logic is, I contend, the most ecologically significant of its agentic qualities. As Parham (2022) has illustrated in his analysis of hydrological thought in Victorian novels, rivers in such texts frequently take on an autonomous mode of time that challenges the linear and developmental time of social narratives: the river is constant, it contains echoes of its entire history in its flow, and ultimately it exists outside the human time frame of the social dramas that take place within it. This temporal difference between the river's geological time and the social time of St. Ogg's—its gossip, its rigid class structure, its romantic plots—generates an important and subtle critique of *The Mill on the Floss*, wherein the community's belief in the static and natural quality of their own social order is undercut by the implicit knowledge that any human structure will eventually be overcome and disappear, being infinitely short-lived on a timescale with the river.

The ecological agency of the river is further evinced through its connection to Maggie Tulliver, who repeatedly embodies her psychological states and emotional crises through her connection to the water. From a very young age, the river is something that pulls Maggie with an intensity that is beyond merely an affectionate fondness; it is as if the river answers a part of her that St. Ogg's cannot and will not acknowledge, and this parallel between the two energetic, desire-driven figures is central to the ecofeminist argument detailed in Section 3.3.

3.2. Pastoral Nostalgia and Its Critique of Industrial Modernity

The Mill on the Floss is full of what Voskuil (2022) terms “pastoral elegy,” or a sort of environmental representation that is obsessed with a lost natural and social world, threatened by the encroachments of modernity. From the very first paragraphs, the narrator looks back at the mill and the river as scenes from memory; thus, the reader is positioned from the start to perceive the world of St. Ogg's as being part of the past, under threat from the march of progress. This pastoral nostalgia is more than mere sentimental regret; it constitutes a systematic critique of the historical transformations occurring under the advent of industrial capitalism. Throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, the natural landscape is presented as being part of a coherent system that includes the mill, the river, agricultural land, and the town of St. Ogg's. The existence of this ecosystem is directly challenged by the encroaching forces of commerce and legal-financial restructuring personified by Wakem and the lawsuit that will bring about the bankruptcy of the Tulliver family; the enclosure of common lands, the commercialization of agriculture, and the destruction of traditional craftsmanship under industrial capitalism form a backdrop for understanding the elegiac aspects of the novel (Hadley, 2020; Tschachler, 2020).

Admittedly, it might be tempting to read Eliot's elegiac rendering of the valley as straightforward nostalgia—yet I find this reading unsatisfactory. Eliot's nostalgic remembrance of a pastoral landscape cannot, however, be dismissed as mere conservation sentiment. As Nixon (2019) has shown in his study of what he calls “slow violence” in Victorian environmental fiction, this past world was itself founded on exploitation—of labor, of land, of nature; the mill is a site of natural exploitation that harnessed the river's energy to produce goods commercially, and agriculture in the valley exploited the environment through constant manipulation. Eliot's pastoral nostalgia therefore mourns a lost world without fully coming to terms with the violence this world inflicted on the individuals who belonged to its lower echelons. The novel's elegiac stance can neither separate the mourning of loss from the critique of its destructive historical context nor celebrate a romantic past without acknowledging its complicity in a violent tradition. The starkest comparison between the organic landscape of pastoral memory and the commodifying and abstracting mindset of modernity comes in descriptions of the legal-financial system, which leads to the Tulliver bankruptcy; the legal establishment, represented by lawyer Wakem, embodies a purely social rationality which ignores the values that the pastoral landscape represents. The loss incurred by the Tulliver bankruptcy and their

displacement from their home and way of life is not simply financial; it is also environmental—a disintegration of a form of existence based on particular ecological principles and a connection to a specific piece of land (Goodbody, 2022).

3.3. Ecofeminism: Nature, Woman, and the Social Order

Perhaps the most politically charged dimension of the novel's ecological imagination is its sustained alignment of women and nature within a shared structure of domination. The ecofeminist nature of *The Mill on the Floss* has been discussed in previous ecocritical analyses (Sultzbach, 2020; Westling, 2021), though it is a multilayered aspect of the novel that has not been comprehensively analyzed in detail; three modes of depicting the parallelism between women and nature that can be found in *The Mill on the Floss* have been identified here: the imagistic (through shared metaphors and imagery), the structural (through parallels in disciplinary practices employed to control women and nature), and the agentive (through parallelism in their modes of excess and defiance). The similarity of women and nature's disciplining at the structural level of the text is mediated through the novel's analysis of social control. The legal, economic, and reparative mechanisms that St. Ogg's brings to bear against Maggie—and which the novel implicitly identifies with the rational, exploitationist legal and commercial apparatuses that the Tulliver bankruptcy unmasks in their full coercive power—mirror those that govern the natural world. Tom Tulliver's treatment of Maggie—his authority and judgment; his exclusion of her from the family after the Stephen ride—is a miniature version of the macromechanisms that comprise patriarchal regulation of women and nature (Feuerstein, 2023; Lussier, 2022). At the agentive level, both Maggie and the river are characterized by an excess that perpetually bursts its containers. Maggie's emotional and intellectual passions explode the containers of filial piety, propriety, and social expectation that seek to control them, just as the Floss periodically bursts its banks to flood the houses built along it. But far from mere metaphor, this resonance is a structural one, as the novel constructs both Maggie's and the Floss's excesses as eruptions of a nature that cannot be tamed either by engineering or by law. Aligning female desire and natural process is one of the novel's most overtly political moves (Taylor, 2021); indeed, they seem to represent a shared resistance to the attempts to contain both woman and nature in the patriarchal social realm.

3.4. The Flood Ending: Ecological Justice, Natural Punishment, or Formal Necessity?

What does it mean for a Victorian realist novel to end not in social resolution but in ecological catastrophe? The ending of *The Mill on the Floss*, a massive and devastating flood that carries Maggie and Tom to their deaths, is certainly the most critically contentious element of the novel. Eliot herself described the conclusion as arising from “the want of proportionate fulness” in the third volume (Eliot, 1860/2018, as cited in Haight, 1954, p. 317), an admission that points precisely to the irresolvability I argue is structurally necessary. An ecocritical reading suggests that the flood should not be dismissed as either a metaphor or a convenient plot device, but instead explored as an ecological phenomenon whose particular workings should not be reduced to social meaning. Feuerstein (2023) argues that the flood works at three distinct levels: as an effect of natural processes described in the novel; as a social judgment that human society fails to impose; and as a formal acknowledgment of narrative inability to resolve contradictions explored throughout the novel. The ecocritical reading of the flood begins with the explicit warnings of inundation. The opening pages refer to a “round pool” and “black ships,” but multiple later references indicate the Floss's history of overflow, showing that a cataclysm is always a latent possibility for the inhabitants of St. Ogg's. The environmental knowledge of the river's tendencies—its ability to flood and wash out the vulnerable mill—coexists with the humans' social amnesia, the inability to reconcile their social forms with the rhythms and imperatives of nature (Parham, 2022). Thus, the flood, far from being supernatural or judgmental, is shown to be the natural consequence of an ecological ignorance that, once ignored, comes with a terrible price (Lussier, 2022).

The element of social judgment is also key. The St. Ogg's community judges Maggie with exceptional vindictiveness, excluding her from society, publicizing her downfall, and destroying her social capital. The flood that takes her, along with her most ardent and morally upright persecutor, is indiscriminate in its leveling of St. Ogg's social hierarchy. The implicit justice of the flood is one that the text hesitates to speak overtly, though it cannot fully suppress it (Feuerstein, 2023). At this level, natural events provide the justice that the social world withholds. Formal necessity is perhaps the most important dimension of the flood in terms of the preceding analysis. The recourse to natural disaster at the end of realist novels signals a narrative impasse; if social order has constructed the parameters so strictly as to render resolution impossible within social terms, then only an ecological force that is outside of society can destroy the human drama it so perfectly mirrors (Goodbody, 2022). Maggie's death by flood is thus not necessarily an act of punishment, but a final acknowledgment of the absence of a habitable future for her within St. Ogg's, which has been so rigidly defined against her intellectual and passionate desires.

4. Discussion

The ecocritical reading has several far-reaching implications for Victorian literary criticism and for ecocriticism. First and foremost, the novel must be recognized as a founding text for a literary history of environmental thought. Eliot's understanding and portrayal of the River Floss as an agent of natural time and agency foreshadows major ecocritical themes such as anthropocentrism, nonhuman agency, the importance of attachment to place, and the social construction of gender and the environment. That such a text should be discovered within the mid-Victorian realism tradition is, I would argue, one of the most revealing findings of this study—and one that invites us to reconsider the ecological richness buried within Victorian realism more broadly. From the ecofeminist angle, the analysis also demonstrates that Eliot's *ecopoiesis* is inextricable from her critique of women. The structural homologies between the disciplinary treatment of women and of nature—i.e., the parallel disciplinary mechanisms through which women and nature are controlled, exploited, and “excessed” within the patriarchal social structures of St. Ogg's—are not fortuitous metaphorical correlations but the structural underpinning of the text's ideology. This aligns the novel with ecofeminist theory while challenging it, for Eliot's naturalization of woman is dual-edged: it not only naturalizes her vitality and energy, but her very naturalness makes her prey to the same ecological and social processes that will consume her (Sultzbach, 2020; Westling, 2021).

The discussion of the role of pastoral nostalgia as an ideologically critical mode also adds new insights to the field. Eliot's pastoral elegy is, I have shown, not a nostalgic lamentation for a pastoral preindustrial world but rather a critical examination of the ecological toll of capitalist modernity that neither idealizes nor condemns the world it laments. The critically sentimental pastoral—where we lament what we have lost and yet acknowledge what was wrong with it—is uniquely Eliotic and represents a more nuanced ecocritical consciousness than purely pastoralist or industrialist discourses. Victorian pastoral nostalgia often becomes a critique of modernity because it vocalizes what is being lost by the transformation it laments (Voskuil, 2022). Finally, the present study has also contributed to recent debate in ecocritical Victorian studies about the nexus between form and ecological thought. In that I argue for the flood as a simultaneous ecological event, social judgment, and statement of formal irresolvability, the analysis has offered a way of showing how ecocriticism might bring a new kind of focus to a Victorian realist novel's *ecopoiesis* and formal choices: the ending of a novel carries a unique kind of implicit statement about social and natural determinism which cannot always be voiced through social realism. My readings of the flood ending supplement and expand recent critical works (Feuerstein, 2023; Lussier, 2022) toward a more holistic analysis of the trope. Limitations of the current study include its concentrated focus on the River Floss and flood ending: the representation of agricultural land, the ecologies of industrialism, and the role of animals, all crucial elements of the novel's *ecopoiesis*, receive less analytical treatment. Similarly, without comparative

analyses with other Victorian environmental novels—such as *North and South*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Adam Bede*—it is difficult to gauge the specificity of *The Mill on the Floss*. Future research ought to explore these limitations.

5. Conclusion

The present article has provided a systematic ecocritical reading of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, demonstrating the novel's development of an ecopoiesis that preempts key concerns of contemporary ecocriticism, but that nonetheless presents a distinctly Victorian form of ecoconsciousness. Through a combination of the river as ecological actor, nostalgic critique of capitalist modernity, ecofeminist gender relations, and the concluding flood ending, the article has illuminated nature as an active agent within the novel and its ideological work, rather than as a passive background or static symbol. The main contributions of the analysis are as follows: (1) the River Floss as a dynamic ecological agent whose material agency and geological timescale sustain and then overwhelm the human social fabric of St. Ogg's, challenging anthropocentrism in the social order; (2) the nostalgic longing for the valley landscape as critical engagement with the ecological price of capitalist modernity, albeit with a careful self-critique; (3) the homologies between the gender discipline of femininity and that of nature in the ecofeminist reading of the novel, where Maggie Tulliver and the River Floss emerge as the excesses that the patriarchal social order cannot contain nonviolently; and (4) the flood ending as a multimodal convergence of ecological disaster, social judgment, and formal testament to the irreconcilable nature of social and natural determinism throughout the novel.

This study holds significance in two main ways: first, it establishes *The Mill on the Floss* as a far more complex eco-narrative than it has previously been understood to be and contributes to the emerging corpus of ecocritically oriented readings of Victorian literature; second, it suggests that critical ecofeminist and other ecocritical frameworks can open up heretofore unexamined dimensions of canonical realist texts like *The Mill on the Floss*, whose literary explorations of non-anthropocentrism, emplacement, women's ecological roles, and critiques of industrialization anticipate contemporary environmental debates. Further research could explore an ecocritical framework for Eliot's other novels, with special emphasis on the agricultural landscapes of *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*. Comparative ecocritical studies of *The Mill on the Floss* with international counterparts, such as those of Flaubert, Zola, and Turgenev, are also much needed in order to illuminate how Eliot's specific ecological vision fits within a larger European context of environmental realism.

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