‘For the cake was so pretty’: Tactile Interventions in Taste; or, Having One’s Cake and Eating It in *The Mill on the Floss*

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> As long as the food is yet in our mouth, we feel it, we taste it, we handle it just as we choose. [. . .] But the instant the pellet touches those mysterious curtains, it is beyond our control, and, under ordinary circumstances, becomes even lost to our consciousness. A faint impression of taste is all that lingers behind.[1]

> Not only may taste enjoyments be tempting and diverting, but tastes can be indulged, abused, depraved, and even perverted. [. . .] Moreover, it seems a frivolous pursuit permitted only a leisured few: those who have plenty to eat and to drink.[2]

In December 1855 *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* published an article depicting the current cultural and scientific understandings of the five senses. Taste and touch, the two most proximate senses, are closely linked in this piece; it is impossible to taste without touching substances with the tongue. Thus the description of tasting is made more evocative through recognizing the tactile experience:

> Jaws, and teeth, and tongue are all subject to our will. By touch we judge of the time when the morsel is ready for swallowing; as soon as the feast of the tongue is over, we roll it up into a tiny ball and drive it backward, aiding the movement by saliva or the fluids we may have taken. (‘The Senses — Taste’, p. 78)

Within this act of eating, it is the tactile control of taste that marks the agency and possibility for aesthetic judgement within the material sensory experience. Sensory philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer’s observations on the capacities for taste to be indulged and perverted suggests an understanding of the particular relationship between taste, touch, and agency, which bleeds into social and moral agency. She argues that ‘both touch and taste

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[1] ‘The Senses — Taste’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, December 1855, pp. 73–81 (p. 78).
[2] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 1.

figure as the senses that require the most control, since they can deliver pleasures that tempt one to indulge in the appetites' (*Making Sense of Taste*, p. 2). Similarly, in *Moral Taste*, Marjorie Garson links literal gustatory taste with metaphorical aesthetic taste in the formation of the human psyche; as does Gwen Hyman, who further argues that the manner in which one consumes particular tastes defines identity: 'This is what table and taste reveal: what we are greedy for, what we hunger for, what we cannot live without.'[3] Importantly, literal and metaphorical appetites are used to construct the individual's identity, as well as the way in which the individual seeks to sate those desires. This connection between matter and form is crucial in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), a novel in which the impulse to move up the social ladder and become socially and economically established is mirrored by a compulsive desire to moderate and control taste, touch, and food consumption in a way that parallels financial and social austerity. For Maggie Tulliver in particular, it is the denial of taste and touch — her perverse repression of her appetites — that creates personal and social instability, rather than the more common narrative of dangerously insatiable young women. Regenia Gagnier problematizes the idea of taste as subjective, or even arbitrary, by arguing that it is necessary to show 'how tastes and choices develop and, just as important, are constrained', pointing out that '"taste" means more than neutral "choice"';[4] and in this way, the act of manipulating tastes — both one's own and those of others — is revealed to be a powerful tool in gaining, maintaining, and limiting social agency.

The slippages between metaphor and the material in these understandings of taste provide a provocative space through which to understand the importance of taste in reading class and economic instability in mid-nineteenth-century cultural history. Taste intervenes significantly in current discussions on hunger in the Victorian period — from histories of famine, to hunger strikes, to eating disorders — by complicating the extent of choice or agency available to the one who is hungry.[5] David Howes and

[3] Marjorie Garson, *Moral Taste: Aesthetics, Subjectivities, and Social Power in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Gwen Hyman, *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), pp. 2–3.

[4] Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 10.

[5] For key works on hunger, see Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gordon Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *Hunger in History: Food Shortage, Poverty, and Deprivation*, ed. by Lucile F. Newman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); and James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). I have written extensively on the intervention of taste in hunger in *Hunger Movements in Early Victorian Literature: Want, Riots, Migration* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Marc Lalonde argue that 'when social boundaries are cast in doubt' the sensory emphasis shifts from the distance senses of sight and sound to the proximate senses of touch and taste,[6] which suggests that the proximate senses become focalized in this way in an attempt to 'arrange social authority'.[7] Yet even more important is the way in which this focalization is outworked in order to condition individual members of a community to adhere to the group's moral and cultural principles, namely, through denying the satisfaction of sensory experience. As Mark Smith argues, 'gustatory [. . .] discourse increase[s] at precisely the moment when a variety of social boundaries [become] blurred, smudged, and unstable', and thus the proximity of taste and touch becomes an intense mode of attempting to re-establish sensory and social stability (p. 81). In examining *The Mill on the Floss*, I will address the ways in which proximate sensory deprivation and the blurring of sensory boundaries work as a means of social conditioning on the Dodson children — Lucy Deane, and Tom and Maggie Tulliver — effectively constructing their adult identities.

Early in Eliot's novel, the three children visit their aunt and uncle Pullet. The indulgent uncle gives each child a sweetcake, but, before they have a chance to eat them, their aunt insists that they wait until they have plates because otherwise 'they would make the floor "all over" crumbs'.[8] The lack of trust aunt Pullet reveals through attempting to regulate the children's touch in this way goes deeper than mere concern for her floor and the effort of cleaning it. Constance Classen points out how the intervention of cutlery and crockery in the modernizing world affected social relations: 'Picking up food directly with one's hands out of a common separate bowl indicated that no artificial barriers or niggling suspicions separated oneself from one's food and one's fellows', while the introduction of 'table manners' interfered with 'communal intimacy' by isolating the individual in their eating experience by giving them their own fork, plate, and so forth: 'every diner was surrounded by an individual cage.'[9] Instead of embracing the children into the social body, aunt Pullet isolates and thereby focalizes them, denying them access to her perceived social status as much as seeking to delay their experience of taste. The merging of gustatory and aesthetic taste in this moment, through the insertion of perceived manners, has a mutual effect on both the children's experience of eating and their social identity.

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[6] David Howes and Marc Lalonde, 'The History of Sensibilities: Of the Standard of Taste in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England and the Circulation of Smells in Post-Revolutionary France', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 16 (1991), 125–35 (p. 130).
[7] Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 76.
[8] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 99.
[9] Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 2, 155.

It is also important that this scene presents non-essential eating — it is a sweetcake, a treat, not a meal of substance or staples. In this way it draws attention to the tensions between need and want, as well as taste and social agency, without blurring the lines further with ideas of physical hunger and starvation. Given that Korsmeyer observes that we eat 'partly because we are hungry, because our bodies need nutriments, because we desire to taste something for the pleasure it delivers' (*Making Sense of Taste*, p. 88), without the necessity of physical hunger, or the capacity for cake to provide nourishment, it is clear that Eliot's scene is one that hones in on the desire to eat for pleasure. Aunt Pullet not permitting the children to touch with their tongues what they hold in their hands speaks to a broader social structure in which appetite and desire are regulated according to perceived moral respectability. The familial social conditioning is a part of the children's acculturation into their community, and, from this perspective, I argue that each child's emotive response to this simultaneous sensory proximity and denial reveals their aesthetic and moral response to their world. In this way, their capacity to hold onto their cake appropriately, as well as to eat it, foreshadows their capacity to negotiate their position within their family and the wider community into adulthood. Cake is a luxury, or as it is described in the narrative, a 'tempting delicacy' (Eliot, p. 99). In both its sweetness and crispness, this cake represents a tactile and flavoured aesthetic promise that satiety will follow the taste and touch of the tongue, but, importantly, one that provides nothing substantial for the body. The denial of the tongue, then, reflects a denial of this promise, which extends into a social vision of absence and longing.

Regulated modes of eating, affect, and social construction

A review of *The Mill on the Floss* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* not only identifies the manifestation of a desire for aesthetic taste as a means to social status through the regulation of gustatory taste, but also reveals the failure of the extended Dodson family to achieve this end. The reviewer applauds the rising merchant who seeks greater education for his heir so that he can be 'prepared, by taste' (in this sense, aesthetic taste) for the higher position, but in the specific example of Eliot's text argues:

> It is from the worst aspect of the money-making middle class — their narrow-minded complacent selfishness, their money-worship, their petty schemes and jealousies — that much, not only of the comedy, but even of the tragedy of the *Mill on the Floss* is drawn.[10]

[10] [William Lucas Collins], 'The Mill on the Floss', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, May 1860, pp. 611–23 (p. 613).

The reviewer goes on to discuss the strict regulation of food that members of the family not only impose on themselves but on each other as evidence of both their selfishness and insecurity over their social position. This analysis calls into question the possibility of tastes being mere personal preference as they become tools of manipulation and social conditioning. While Walter Ong suggests that taste 'is a yes-or-no sense, a take-it-or-don't-take-it sense', as if taste somehow transcends acculturation through its visceral like or dislike,[11] this perspective denies the presence of acquired tastes as well as the willingness to try flavours based on their cultural acceptability. As Marjorie Garson pertinently observes, '"natural taste" is evidently an oxymoron: since what is considered tasteful at any particular historical moment is always a cultural construct, anyone who has taste has already been cultivated' (p. 9). Thus taste, whether used in the literal or metaphorical sense, cannot exist without a cultural point of reference.

Throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, characters seek to influence and regulate each other through regulating their perception of sensory experiences. While I will focus mostly on the three children, it is important to understand the role of this kind of manipulation in the broader context of Eliot's novel in order to recognize the role of sensory regulation, especially in regard to eating, in the formation of the community Eliot represents. It is also important to note that regulation occurs both externally to individual characters — characters imposing regulation on others — and through the characters attempting to regulate their own sensory and aesthetic relationship towards food. Every encounter with food in the novel is entwined with ideas of social belonging, position, and responsibility, and the extended Dodson family is inherently obsessed with eating and the manner in which eating takes place. While female Dodsons 'always ate dry bread with [their] tea and declined any sort of preserves' when in 'strange houses', even within the family home they isolate and hierarchize each other through modes of eating (Eliot, p. 48). Alain Corbin writes of the importance of regulating and training tastes, and the acculturation of food, observing that 'the number of meals and their distribution throughout the day varied according to place, tradition, occupation, season, social status and position', suggesting that the 'hour of the meal, like diet and table manners [. . .] became one of the cultural cleavages whose sharper definition constituted a major historical fact of the early nineteenth century'.[12] With the meal positioned so centrally, it is unsurprising that Mrs Glegg is first introduced in the novel seeking to assert her authority in the family by criticizing what she sees as her sister's lack of regimented timing at dinner: 'Yes, yes, I know how it is

[11] Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, 2nd edn (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 5.
[12] Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 1–2.

wi' husbands — they're for putting everything off — they'll put dinner off till after tea, if they've got wives as are weak enough to give in to such work' (p. 60). This statement asserts Mrs Glegg's belief in her power to restrain her own husband, as she intimately connects economic extravagance with keeping to a tight meal schedule. Her obsession with timing and austerity continues as she goes on to harangue Mrs Tulliver over the content of the meal:

> And I hope you've not gone and got a great dinner for us — going to expense for your sisters as 'ud sooner eat a crust o' dry bread nor help ruin you with extravagance. [. . .] A boiled joint, as you could make broth of for the kitchen [. . .] and a plain pudding with a spoonful o' sugar and no spice, 'ud be far more becoming. (p. 60)

As much as Mrs Glegg's comments are related to economizing, they also seek to control the kinds of tastes in which the Tullivers ought to partake. The suggestion is very evident that Mrs Glegg sees the Tullivers as not being economically or socially worthy of partaking in the luxury of spices, and that for them to do so is an extravagance, even a perversion of their position in much the same way as their grotesque inability to adhere to perceived rules surrounding appropriate meal times. As Megan Ward notes, 'taste is a sensory experience that is also a judgment of the exterior world, on the somatic experience of beauty or ugliness.'[13] In this context, Mrs Glegg extends her judgement of the exterior world — the management of capital — to her judgement on her sister's family. Similarly, Carolyn Korsmeyer suggests that among 'the paradoxes that surround taste, few loom larger than the fact that taste is supposed to be little more than a bodily sensation, yet at the same time it provides the metaphor for the finest cultivation of perceptual experience', and within this paradox lies the space for cultural manipulation.[14]

Gwen Hyman explicates the importance of shared eating as a space of cultural construction:

> Meals are physical, temporal, and psychological spaces in which class and gender behaviours are marked and remarked upon; in which good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, and constructive and destructive ideas and actions are negotiated through manners and etiquette as well as through the food that is taken and refused. [. . .] In this sense, society

[13] Megan Ward, '"A Charm in those Fingers": Patterns, Taste, and the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 41 (2008), 248–69 (p. 257).
[14] Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'Introduction: Perspectives on Taste', in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. by Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 1–9 (p. 6).

> comes to itself through the transaction of the meal: precisely because of its insistence on form (or, equally telling, its insistence on the refusal of form), the rite of alimentary consumption constitutes a ground on which the socio-political realm is made and remade. (p. 4)

The form of eating, then, reveals the social relationships at play, as well as levels of trust and common feeling. Form provides a tactile intervention in the experience of eating: the hard, cold steel of the fork, as opposed to the softness and warmth of fingers, affects the taste-experience of the food as much as it interferes with the intimacy of social eating. As much as Mrs Glegg's desire to order her sister's kitchen reveals both her desire to control her sister as well as her self-imposed obsessive austerity with food regulation, Mrs Pullet's need to make the children wait for plates before eating reveals her need to be positioned within a particular social status — a status that further depends on her extended family behaving appropriately in accordance with that status. If her nieces and nephew do not behave appropriately with food, especially within her domestic space, then they compromise the integrity of her social position. Corinna Wagner expresses this implication most clearly when she refers to communal eating as 'the material embodiment of shared ideals' and suggests that 'the sense of security and equality in this environment encourages the exercise of collective judgement'.[15] Conversely, the disruption of the ordered meal can promote insecurity and highlight inequalities as well as injustices among the participants. This connection can be tied back to the Middle Ages when it was common to eat with hands from a common bowl, enforcing a 'sense of integration with the social and physical environment' between the participants (Classen, p. 2). Significantly, Classen observes that the introduction of forks in the seventeenth century was initially considered 'ridiculous and offensive', as if to eat with a fork was to say that one distrusted those with whom one ate (p. 2). To read this tradition back through *The Mill on the Floss*, Mr Pullet shows gregariousness in his gift of sweetcakes, while his wife is very evidently distrusting of the children's inability to eat without spilling — a distrust that extends to her opinion of the children's characters in general.

Extremes of appetite

George Henry Lewes opens *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859) with the observation that

[15] Corinna Wagner, *Pathological Bodies: Medicine and Political Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 185.

> hunger [. . .] is, indeed, the very fire of life, underlying all impulses to labour, and moving man to noble activities by its imperious demands [. . .]. [But] when its progress is unchecked, it becomes a devouring flame, destroying all that is noble in man.[16]

The primacy Lewes gives to hunger can be understood in both the physical and metaphorical sense: when one has enough, there is little impetus to seek change; but the sensation of hunger causes one to awaken to lack, whether that lack is physical, psychological, or social. As a result, the physical and metaphorical become entwined, and in this article I interpret both in terms of appetite and desire. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver's persistent physical appetite — and its constant conflict with her social, intellectual, and sexual longings — is one of the most notable aspects of the text. In this way, Maggie functions as a powerful example of the very real dialogism between physical appetite and aesthetic desire. However, Lucy Deane's lack of physical appetite is positioned at the other extreme and can also be seen as dangerous. In some ways, Lucy resembles sufferers of congenital hyperinsulinism, who, while their senses of taste and smell are not affected, never feel hunger pangs. As a result, they are at risk of malnutrition. Because Lucy Deane has never had to be hungry, she is rendered without appetite. The contrast between the cousins in this regard can be linked to Leeann Hunter's recognition of the 'daughters-of-bankruptcy' narrative, which, she argues, was a driving metaphor in the Victorian period that 'expos[ed] moral weaknesses brewing beneath a society marked by rapid industrial progress, economic growth, and social change'.[17] In a narrative world that, in Hunter's words, longs for a time 'governed by social capital, not liquid assets' (p. 145), both excessive appetite and the excessive lack of it in these cousins can be read as responses to their gendered positions within their society; and both end tragically: Maggie through desolation and death, Lucy through literary erasure as the novel ends with a ghostly representation in which even her name has been removed.

Lucy's erasure begins in the early scene at the Pullets'. Lucy's and Tom's responses to holding the cakes but not being permitted to eat them are not even afforded individual, whole sentences, while Maggie's is privileged in terms of narrative form. However, in their one, shared sentence, Lucy and Tom provide deep insight into the way their characters respond to social agency:

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[16] George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1859), I, 1–2.

[17] Leeann Hunter, 'Communities Built from Ruins: Social Economics in Victorian Novels of Bankruptcy', in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 39 (2011), 137–52 (p. 138).

> Lucy didn't mind that much, for the cake was so pretty, she thought it was rather a pity to eat it, but Tom, watching his opportunity while the elders were talking, hastily stowed it in his mouth at two bites, and chewed it furtively. (p. 99)

While feminist studies have noted and critiqued the way in which Lucy exemplifies the so-called ideal domestic middle-class woman, reading her through her lack of appetite provides further explanation for her erasure: 'food is self-indulgent, inappropriate, decadent' (Hyman, p. 4). The Deanes, however, are the family who are actually in control, successfully, although not ostentatiously, disciplining not just their own appetites, but those of their family, through loans, as well as providing Tom, for example, with employment and (crucially) guidance. They not only have the desired financial capital, they are able to successfully display the aesthetic tastes deemed appropriate to the class to which the Dodsons aspire. Lucy not only belongs to the wealthiest and most economically stable branch of the Dodson family tree, she is also an only child, which exacerbates her position: she lacks for nothing material, she never needs to learn to share with siblings, and she thus never knows what it is to want something. She therefore lacks passion and desire, the metaphorical appetite signalling which characters are dynamic. Even when she becomes aware of Stephen and Maggie's near-elopement, her absolute willingness to forgive, while morally admirable, is also disturbing: by not showing anger or resentment at the seeming betrayal, Lucy seems to lack feeling. Her sensory receptors are focused on the most external, distance sense, that of the eye; and it therefore stands to reason that the visual is what overtakes her when she is given the sweetcake to hold.

David Howes and Constance Classen discuss Kant's dismissal of taste as 'provid[ing] only sensations of pleasure or disgust' and thereby 'offer[ing] nothing to the contemplative mind', explaining that in Kant's view, the

> less we are aware of our bodies when we perceive [. . .] the freer we are to think and form aesthetic judgements about the thing being perceived. Only sight, the 'noblest' of the senses, seemed to have the detached 'purity' necessary for the task.[18]

Lucy's appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of the cake could be viewed as reflecting a Kantian purity; however, she is blinded to appreciating the cake for what it was designed for: it is not meant to satisfy the eye but the tongue and, ultimately, the stomach. Thus, while on one level it would seem that Lucy achieves a kind of aesthetic satisfaction and does not suffer

[18] David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 20.

the same kind of frustration and emotional unrest as her cousins, she is no more able than they are to satisfy her stomach. Her cake is therefore just as untouchable in terms of its intended purpose: the 'untouchable is thus kept at a distance by the gaze, or *regard*, in French [. . .], or in any case at an attentive distance, in order to watch out carefully, to guard [. . .] against touching, affecting, corrupting'.[19] Lucy's characteristic absence of appetite extends into her later appreciation of music and also her relationships with Stephen and Maggie. Eliot's narrative ironically observes:

> Surely the only courtship unshaken by doubts and fears must be that in which the lovers can sing together. The sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment between the notes of the silvery soprano [. . .] is likely enough to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement. (p. 382)

Thus Lucy and Stephen's courtship is positioned as a performance: one that is aesthetically pleasing to observe and hear but lacking in passionate substance. Lucy's trained appreciation and privileging of distance aesthetics (sight and sound) over anything else creates an impression that she is distanced from any kind of visceral emotive response. As a character, she is denied feeling. While this enables her to forgive Stephen and Maggie, and even to be with Stephen in the end, there does not seem to be anything gained by this: there is no virtue because there is so denial of self, and the narrative does not give voice to any sense of her suffering. Lucy may appear — again, as a superficial aesthetic image — to be the ideal woman, but she is empty. This is no more clearly seen than at the end of the novel when she and Stephen visit the grave, but they are not named: they appear as ghosts, without human form. Lucy has, effectively, no social or emotive agency. Her repression is so extreme that she does not realize at any stage that she ought to be hungry.

Tom exists at another extreme, exemplifying capitalist endeavour. Buying into the scarcity mentality that Gagnier presents in which 'self-interest dictates that each fights to secure [their] own requirements to the exclusion of others' (Gagnier, p. 47), Tom is furtive and selfish, even domineering, exemplifying the tyrannical potential of capitalism to crush others to gain his end. He appropriates a higher social position by being attuned to his own appetite:

> The gentleman is a dangerous alimental force: always threatened with placelessness, he seeks to locate and mark himself through his feasting and fasting; but in doing so, he inevitably threatens to starve, to subsume, to swallow the community around him. (Hyman, p. 3)

[19] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching — Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 67.

Not only is Tom prepared to go to any length to satisfy what he sees as his physical need, he is economical in the way he does it: with his sweetcake, he watches to make sure he is not observed, thereby avoiding intervention; he eats the cake in two bites, for it is not an aesthetic object for him; and he also manages to eat it without spilling any, for to do so would be to waste it. As a young adult, Tom is described as having an appetite for 'treats and benefits', but his 'practical shrewdness' leads him towards 'abstinence and self-denial' in order to gain greater capital and therefore, in his mind, greater pleasure. He chooses deferral, 'determin[ing] to achieve these things sooner or later' (Eliot, p. 321). This particular form of self-denial is not the same as the feminine ideal that required abject self-sacrifice; this is self-denial for self-gain. It is delayed gratification, significantly not *denied* gratification, and only when delay is necessary: hence he delays eating the cake long enough to make sure the adults are not watching, then he consumes as quickly as he can.

Eliot's distrust of capitalism is shown in that even when Tom is financially stable, he is unable to enjoy his prosperity. Kathleen Blake observes that 'Tom, as a capitalist, has a strong appetite for pleasure and looks forward to living well someday but meanwhile faces privation and exercises abstinence and self-denial to save', but even when he reaches adulthood and reasonable security, he is restless in his bitterness towards Mr Wakem and Philip, as well as his continued need to acquire more.[20] Deanna Kreisel refers to the burden placed on Tom through his father's debt, and it is logical to read Tom's adult attitude through fear of financial uncertainty.[21] Crucially, instead of emulating Mr Deane, Tom's adult response is modelled on the austere Mr and Mrs Glegg, who provide a provocative example of wasted capital and wasted, ungenerous lives in which such waste is disguised as a virtue. The pain of self-sacrifice internalizes a form of morality, regardless of the external consequences, embodying another dangerous form of individualistic excess. Ironically, by marking capital as worth deferring, the individual desire for that capital is reaffirmed, and the denial of enjoyment becomes a signifier of worth. In this way, characters like Maggie (in the extreme), but also Tom and the Gleggs, buy into the Mathusian ideal of 'moral restraint' while challenging the understanding of early political economy that every man is 'rich or poor according to his ability to enjoy the necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of life' (Blake, p. 220). Crucially, Tom and the Gleggs

[20] Kathleen Blake, 'Between Economies in *The Mill on the Floss*: Loans versus Gifts, or, Auditing Mr. Tulliver's Accounts', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33 (2005), 219–37 (p. 224).
[21] Deanna Kreisel, 'Superfluity and Suction: The Problem with Saving in *The Mill on the Floss*', *NOVEL*, 35 (2001), 69–103 (p. 95).

do have the economic capacity to enjoy such objects; yet their choosing not to indulge those tastes prevents them from finding satisfaction: they touch without touching.

Tom's motivation throughout the novel is for vengeance, control, and his own material advancement, aspects that shape every one of his relationships. At the same time, in the context of the cake, Eliot creates a useful dialogue between sensory and analogical taste: Tom's extreme capitalism renders him tasteless. He does not appreciate the flavour of the cake, any more than he has a taste or appreciation for his education. More importantly, though, food is not merely a way for him to sate his physical hunger; eating is an expression of his agency and power. By eating the cake against aunt Pullet's instructions, Tom revels in the way he has outwitted the adults, and throughout his childhood he uses cruel food power plays to manipulate Maggie, taking advantage of his recognition of his sister's emotional hunger for love, acceptance, and significance. When Tom feels that his sense of power or control is at risk, he engages in psychological violence through access and denial of food. His emotional abuse is written in language of gluttony, such as when he divides the plum puff between himself and Maggie, yet Maggie wins the best part instead of him. Maggie, hungrier for her brother's approval than for the pastry, offers her brother the best part, but he refuses it then deems her 'greedy' for having accepted it (Eliot, p. 50). Tom's abuse spoils the taste of the pastry for Maggie, thereby re-establishing his entitlement: 'Not but that the puff was very nice, for Maggie's palate was not at all obtuse, but she would have gone without it many times over, sooner than Tom should call her greedy and be cross with her' (p. 51).

This kind of punishment is only a part of Tom's relational abuse through food. Earlier in the novel, when he is punishing Maggie for letting his rabbits die — ironically by forgetting to feed them — he convinces her to stop crying by sharing cake with her. This act seems like kindness, but it is also symptomatic of the way in which Tom constantly uses food to assert his fraternal power, giving her some cake, which he knows she has a taste for, but just as quickly taking it away from her as a punishment. Certainly, Tom's childhood actions can be read as a young boy trying to fit into a mould of masculinity — justice and fairness, but alongside that, a childish resentment of not getting his way — but the problem is that Tom does not grow out of his tendency towards resentment, and his treatment of Maggie's regard of Philip Wakem and then Stephen Guest reveals a cold moral pragmatism that only calls upon morality when it suits his purpose — what he sees as his material gain. In a near-sinister way, Tom quickly moves beyond the external physicalities of the tactile to master others through the internal, metaphorical touch of psychological response.

Beyond extremes of touch

Both Lucy and Tom are positioned in terms of agency through the mediation of their sensory experience. This experience is in no way objective but formed through the cultural expectations placed on them in terms of the way they are meant to perceive their world. Lucy's childhood response to the sweetcake not only denies taste but has little recognition of the tactile; while Tom is wholly tactile, ignoring taste in order to fill his stomach as quickly as possible. It is also significant that he is willing to give up the control over his tactile experience (holding the cake in his hands, or even appreciating its texture on his tongue), swallowing quickly to meet two ends: the satisfaction of his stomach and his pride of position. Tom's pragmatism means he wants the feeling of his stomach being filled more than he wants to be conscious of the tactile experience of eating. Alongside Lucy's repression of taste into the visual and Tom's rejection of the material value of taste for himself but his use of others' tastes to manipulate them, Maggie's extreme awareness of the ways in which her appetite and tastes chaotically work against each other and against her provides a crucial representation of the affective core that belongs to all appetites, and is teased, tantalized, and trained through taste. In effect, Maggie's paradoxical combination of sensory overload and sensory denial provides insight into her fraught place in her world.

Maggie's experience is narrated in one single yet dense and complex sentence:

> As for Maggie, becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa, which uncle Pullet had bought as a 'pretty Scripture thing', she presently let fall her cake and in an unlucky movement, crushed it beneath her foot — a source of so much agitation to aunt Pullet and conscious disgrace to Maggie that she began to despair of hearing the musical snuff-box to-day, till after some reflection, it occurred to her that Lucy was in high favour enough to venture on asking for a tune. So she whispered to Lucy, and Lucy, who always did what she was desired to do, went up quietly to her uncle's knee and blushing all over her neck while she fingered her necklace, said, 'Will you please play us a tune, uncle?'. (p. 99)

Maggie's capacity to adapt in this situation is important. She and Tom are both in extremely bad favour (not that Tom cares, since no one can take his cake off him now), but Maggie wants to hear the music. She is clever enough to use Lucy and Lucy's favour to meet her end. Unfortunately for Maggie, though, this kind of borrowed agency is extremely limited. Maggie's rather long sentence about dropping her cake is a confusion of sensory desire, even bordering on a kind of synaesthesia: there is the visual

aesthetic of the print, the desire to hear music, as well as the tactility of stepping on the cake, let alone the dropping of it. Each sensory-desire blends into the others, causing a mess on aunt Pullet's floor that signifies Maggie's shame for not fitting into her world. The disapproval from those whom she so desperately wants acceptance far outweighs whether or not Maggie gets to eat the cake. Maggie is like Lucy in her lack of physical appetite at this point but, unlike Lucy, this absence is more than adequately filled, and even supplanted, by the intellectual desire that causes her distraction in the first place and her emotional hunger manifesting through her shame.

The choice of Ulysses and Nausicaa is an important one for Eliot. In Greek mythology, Nausicaa brought food and wine to Ulysses and also fell in love with him, an affection he did not return. Within this tale, there is an expectation of reciprocation written through food, and this is why, in Eliot's narrative, Tom's manipulation of Maggie through food is so potent. Maggie's tragedy is even more poignant because uncle Pullet does not recognize the scene in the print — thinking it is a biblical print — whereas the implication is that the intellectually hungry Maggie immediately recognizes it, clearly to her detriment. Just as her theological tastes prefer the asceticism of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (*c*. 1418–27) over the popular, and significantly more moderate advice book *The Economy of Human Life* (1751), Maggie constantly reinforces her own appetites through self-denial, sometimes deliberately, but also unconsciously. It is as though she seeks to experience Augustine's 'palate of the heart' and the 'sweetness' of the divine taken up by the medieval theologians by refusing to allow herself pleasure or satisfaction (Howes and Classen, p. 96). It is most telling, for instance, that the narrative informs the reader that had Maggie gone through with her elopement, rather than changing her mind and choosing to obey the moral expectations of her community, that community would have, ironically, forgiven her more readily.

Maggie's education is written in terms of the tactility of taste and an insatiable appetite:

> Even at school she had often wished for books with more in them: everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately. And now — without the indirect charm of school emulation — Télémaque was mere bran; so were the hard dry questions on Christian doctrine: there was no flavour in them, no strength. And so the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of syllogism, and feeling a gleam of triumph now and then that her understanding was quite equal to these peculiarly masculine studies. (Eliot, pp. 298–99)

Taste and tactility are bound together in Maggie's perspective on her education: the vivid hardness and dryness on the tongue of religious doctrine offers nothing to sustain her. The education she gives herself, described as 'thick-rinded fruit', speaks to a satisfaction in pursuit and endeavour, and sweetness in accomplishment. It is an accomplishment that also may suggest the forbidden fruit and fallenness — that Maggie's education and her insatiable appetites are what cause her downfall.

I would argue, however, in opposition to much criticism of Maggie, that it is not Maggie's insatiability that destroys her but her desire to be able to regulate her insatiability. In trying to fit into the conventional middle-class female role, Maggie seeks to discipline her taste against overindulgence (Smith, p. 76). Yet, the more she tries to be moderate — to be like her cousin Lucy — the more she fails. As Kreisel pertinently argues, the 'problem with Maggie's plan of renunciation [. . .] is that it is, itself, immoderate' (p. 91). Her griefs over her failures feed upon each other and multiply. As much as Maggie cannot let go of the grief of choosing the wrong half of the plum puff or of forgetting to feed Tom's rabbits, she cannot forgive herself for disappointing Philip, Stephen, Lucy, or Tom in adulthood. In this way, she disconnects herself from the possibility of sating her greatest desire, that of acceptance and love within her community. Even when Lucy forgives her, this is not enough for Maggie. Maggie expects her cousin to feel more, and through Lucy's feeling (like the earlier appropriation of Lucy's favour), Maggie would perhaps gain some self-flagellating relief.

Hyman argues that 'aliment is an unavoidable locus of power and danger: it is the means by which the individual writes and rewrites him- or herself, the marker by which societies define themselves' (p. 2), and in this way, Maggie and Lucy are much more alike than an initial reading would suggest. Both as girls and then as women, they deny themselves touch and taste through engagement with distance and the visual. The difference between them lies in the deliberateness of their self-denial. As an alternative to those that read Maggie's tragedy as lying in her uncontrollable body, I would suggest that it is at the moment when Maggie chooses to not eat — to not taste, to refrain, to repress her hunger — that her tragedy reaches the point of no return. The connection between taste and touch is crucial because tasting involves touching in a way that takes the tactile within one's body, incorporating the tactile into one's physiological being in a way that severely risks immoderation. To touch without tasting denies the full satisfaction of appetite, becoming a perverse means to moderate this risk. Not one of the three children with a sweetcake gets to taste — only Tom eats — and, without the satisfaction of taste and texture, even eating cannot satisfy. While Maggie's sensory chaos is dangerous, her true destruction, however, occurs when she chooses to deny her appetites, attempting to engage no longer with proximate sensory experience. The tragedies of

The Mill on the Floss become most potent not merely in the way they are narrated through the language of taste and touch but in the extent to which characters are made aware of their appetite. When food can be seen but not tasted, some sense of deprivation can be gained, but the restriction of touch as well as taste creates not just an understanding of inequality but a visceral sense of injustice.