

The Figure of the 'Dark Heroine' in "Janet's Repentance"

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I. Introduction

George Eliot (1819-1880) published the three stories called *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) that started her on her career as a novelist. Many scholars point out that in these stories, we can see early glimpses of Eliot's philosophy as well as her later motifs and techniques. "Janet's Repentance" is the third story of this book and Janet is the first of Eliot's 'dark heroines'.

In most of George Eliot's novels, a 'dark heroine' (who has dark hair and dark eyes) dominates the scene. They are 'dark' heroines because they struggle with evil, not just in the world but in themselves.¹ This struggle is a kind of self-conquest, during which they taste "rejection and conflict".² As a result, these 'dark heroines' ultimately achieve mental growth.

This essay examines the 'dark heroine' of 'Janet's Repentance' as a basic figure in Eliot's work. Janet's depiction and transfiguration are early manifestations of what will become recurrent themes in Eliot's novels. I specifically focus on Eliot's use of imagery and its function in depicting Janet's transfiguration in the novel.

II

Janet is married to Dempster, a brutal and drunken lawyer. They have no children. Janet was a well-educated and promising young woman. However she "had nothing to look to but being a governess" (210).³ So, she was driven to marry Dempster against the advice of her best friends. Now her life is miserable, but she is too proud to admit her mistake. Therefore she pretends "to have the highest respect for her husband's qualities" (211) and "stands up for everything her husband says and does" (211). Nevertheless, everyone in the town of Milby knows her true state.

The brutal treatment by Dempster has led her to alcoholism. One night, her husband returns home the worse for drink. He uses the knocker to let himself in, but there is no response and he waits in the dark. When Janet appears a few minutes later, he detects that she has been drinking. He says "What, you've been drinking again, have you? I'll beat you into

your senses" (220). and strikes her heavily and repeatedly. Janet can't resist him, simply begging "O Robert! Pity! Pity!" (221). This scene makes it clear that Janet is treated as a slave in the house and puts up with Dempster's brutality out of fear.

The arrival of the Evangelical clergyman, Mr. Tryan forces Janet into action. Tryan is known to be well received in many good houses, and many people support him. Janet initially supports the "anti-Tryanite" (201) party which is led by her husband. She is accustomed to jeer at Tryan: "We hear Tryan is making sure of the bishop's support; but we shall see. I would give my crooked guinea, and all the luck it will ever bring me, to have him beaten" (225). At this point, Janet resists Tryan only because her husband opposes him. Janet doesn't have her own ideas and is always controlled by her husband. When Dempster appeals to her to form a plan to humiliate Tryan, Janet goes along with it, just happy to find something they can agree on. Meanwhile, luck has turned against Dempster. His mother dies and he loses his good client, Mr. Jerome. As a result, he drinks more heavily which causes his ill treatment of Janet to worsen. Eventually, Janet can't contain her anger. When Dempster flings the coat at her from up-stairs, she reveals her feelings. The coat only brushes her shoulder and falls some distance within the drawing-room. Eliot depicts Janet's anger as follows:

Janet's face flushed with anger, and for the first time in her life her resentment overcame the long-cherished pride that made her hide her griefs from the world. There are moments when by some strange impulse we contradict our past selves—fatal moments, when a fit of passion, like a lava stream, lays low the work of half our lives (271).

In this way, her accumulated frustration erupts at last. Eliot's comparison of Janet's anger to "a lava stream" suggests its explosiveness. Here, we can see Janet's anger for the first time. After Janet feels this emotion, she commits her first act of resistance against her husband. In stead of picking up the coat as Dempster orders, she leaves it on the floor hoping to shame Dempster in front of visitors. In response, Dempster pushes her to the entrance of the house and thrusts her outside. Janet is shut out in the middle of a cold night. At first, she is at a loss having no idea what she should do next. Finally, she takes refuge with a friend, Mrs. Pettifer who convinces her to appeal to Tryan for help. Janet resisted Tryan before, but as Pauline Nestor remarks, Tryan plays "the decisive role in the redemption of Janet Dempster, and here is a salvation from alcoholism and despair which is entirely of this world";⁴ Under Tryan's influence Janet becomes stronger and stronger. This change is reflected in Eliot's choice of imagery regarding Janet. Not coincidentally, Janet's newfound independence changes her into a 'Demon' in Dempster's dream.

After Janet is shut out of the house by Dempster, he is seriously injured in an accident. He is "stunned with the fall" (302) and enters a coma. Janet is shocked to hear this news and

decides to go home to nurse him. However, Dempster is in delirious and has a nightmare. In his dream, Janet appears not as his gentle nurse but a threatening Medusa.⁵ He cries:

her hair is all serpents—they're black serpents—they hiss—they hiss—let me go— let me go—she wants to drag me with her cold arm—her arms are serpents—they are great white serpents—they'll twine around me—she wants to drag me into the cold water—her bosom is cold—it is black—it is all serpents— (307)

As K.M. Newton points out "Dempster suffers from frightening visions of his wife's revenge",⁶ It starts Janet's revenge. Dempster's delirium continues and he doesn't awake from coma. During this time, Janet nurses him with her gentle tolerance. Although she appears as Medusa in his nightmare, her real state of mind is opposite. She wishes his recovery eagerly. According to Nina Auerbach, the process of woman's transfiguration from an 'Angel in the House' into a 'Demon' is "the central female paradigm that presided over the Victorian imagination".⁷ Indeed, Janet gives us a different imagery and she changes into 'Demon' imagery in Dempster's dream. Besides, in the first story: 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton' of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, We can see the typical 'Angel in the House' woman. It's Mrs. Amos Barton who devotes all her life to her husband and children. Her happiness is all about her family and she has no complaining. Therefore there are no descriptions about her inner sufferings and transfiguration like Janet. She gives us submissive, gentle woman imagery consistently. In Janet, Eliot suggests a new paradigm figure of women femininity that is both strong and gentle. Even after the empowering influence of Tryan, Janet still decides to "wait on [Dempster] with such tenderness such all-forgiving love, that old harshness and cruelty must melt away forever under the heat-sunshine she would pour around him" (311). But in spite of Janet's wish, Dempster is dead at last.

In Eliot's novels, the image of Medusa can be also seen in *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* is a particularly powerful Medusa. Gwendolen, another 'dark heroine' is often depicted as a serpent. Several characters in the novel point out "it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has" (12).⁸ Deronda notices her "evil eye" (10) and detects "demonic force" (407) under her superficial smile. Behind her beautiful figure, there are frigid, selfish, arrogant characteristics. Like Janet, Gwendolen is a well-educated woman and doesn't want to be a governess. Despite her awareness of the existence of Grandcourt's mistress and children, she is driven to marry Grandcourt to save her and family from financial ruin. Unlike Janet, Gwendolen never loved her husband. The marriage proves desperately unhappy. While Janet changes into a 'Demon' only in her husband's nightmare, Gwendolen changes in reality. During the cruise with Grandcourt, Gwendolen can't suppress her violent emotions and hatred for her husband. "The evil longings" and "the evil prayers" (696) come in her mind. She thinks of murder. When Grandcourt falls overboard, she longs for his death. Ultimately,

Grandcourt drowns. Although Gwendolen hesitates to save him, she is not literally responsible for his death. However the clear parallel between Dempster's nightmare drowning and Grandcourt's actual drowning suggests he has been dragged into the cold water by a similar demon. This raises the possibility that their drowning are caused by 'dark heroine's' anger and dreadfulness.

In this way, Janet and Gwendolen are depicted as an embodiment of Medusa. Kanako Yamaneki notes "Medusa's erotic power and outsized energy become not only a menace to masculinity and male dominance, but also a symbol of female potency and the possibility of restoring female power."⁹ Janet and Gwendolen were in a weak position in the home and treated as slaves by their husbands. As a result, their anger changes them into threatening Medusas. In this way, Eliot suggests the figure of Medusa to represent the 'dark heroine's' potential power. And in Gwendolen, the desire for revenge. This power is fully restored to both women after the death of their husbands. Even though their characters are different, Janet and Gwendolen both deviate from the fixed heroine imagery of the Victorian period. Eliot's depiction of her heroines' transfiguration from 'Angel in the House' to 'Demon' creates possibility for a new female identity. Gwendolen, who appears in Eliot's last novel, is the most powerful Medusa figure. However its prototype had already appeared in Janet.

III

During the process of restoring 'dark heroine's' potential power, they struggle with their inner evil. They are intelligent and too proud to confess their sufferings to other people, even to their families. Therefore, they tend to hide their weakness and always suffer alone. But they get a chance to encounter a man to whom they confess their sufferings. This confession is an important step to achieve their mental growth.

During her suffering, Janet remembers the short interview with Tryan and his voice, his words, his look. Then she thinks a new idea as follows:

She wanted *strength* to do right—she wanted to something to rely on besides her own resolutions; for was not the path behind her all strewn with *broken* resolutions? How could she trust in new ones? She had often heard Mr. Tryan laughed at for being fond of great sinners. She began to see a new meaning in those words; he would perhaps understand her helplessness, her wants. If she could pour out her heart to him! If she could for the first time in her life unlock all the chambers of her soul! (280-281)

The image of the locked chamber represents Janet's isolation. She is eager to rely on someone beside herself. Yet, the remembrance of Tryan inspires her. She starts to think of relying on Tryan for help. Also she wants to get strength. After this realization, she confesses of her

despair to Tryan. In her confession, she also speaks about her addiction to drink. The temptation torments Janet and gets stronger and stronger. She says "It seems as if there was a demon in me always making me rush to do what I longed not to do" (285). For Janet, this temptation for drink is her 'dark' side. She has to struggle with this temptation.

After Janet's confession, Tryan responds by making a confession himself. At first, he hesitates to talk about his hard experience. But he thought:

He saw that first thing Janet was to be assured of sympathy. She must be made to feel that her anguish was not strange to him; that he entered into the only half -expressed secrets of her spiritual weakness, before any other message of consolation could find its way to her heart (287).

Entering into Janet's "secrets" is Tryan's first step in rescuing Janet from her locked chamber. The second step is his own confession. Tryan begins to talk about his past suffering. When he was young, he seduced a girl whom he later saw dead on the street. However, he found a friend to whom he opened all his feelings. The friend "made it clear to (him) that the only preparation for coming to Christ and partaking of his salvation, was that very sense of guilt and helplessness which was weighing (him) down" (289). Tryan understands the necessity of "sympathy" to save Janet. Because he experienced the same despair as Janet did. Tryan's confession releases Janet's locked mind. She feels Tryan is a fellow sufferer. As Neil Roberts notes, "the bond of sympathy is strengthened by common experience of suffering",¹⁰ The strength of Janet's and Tryan's relationship lies in the fact that Tryan can sympathize fully because he has suffered as deeply as she does. Therefore he can truly understand Janet's despair. "Sympathy" leads Tryan and Janet to trust each other, and causes Janet to change. This importance of "Sympathy" persists in Eliot's thinking and it is one of the recurrent themes in her novels. In her letters, she claims "If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally".¹¹ Through sympathy, Janet starts to alleviate her suffering and it redeems her. She overcomes her pride and follows Tryan's advice to open her heart as much as she can.

Like Janet, Gwendolen opens her mind and starts to trust Deronda. She confesses everything to him. On the boat with Grandcourt, she struggles with her inner evil, thinking of murder. During her confession, she repents this and decides to be a good woman. Through Deronda's advice, she also decides to cast away her egoistic way of thinking and broaden her mind. As we have seen, sympathy and confession foster the 'dark heroine's' mental growth. Although Neil Roberts points out "In Janet's relations with Tryan there is a certain sanctimony which persists in the last novels, in the relation of Dorothea and Ladislav, and Gwendolen and Deronda",¹² the relationship between Eliot's men and her 'dark heroines' is based in mutuality. "Sympathy" between men and women is Eliot's one of the patterns and important parts in her novels.

IV

Another reflection of the dark heroine's struggle for growth is the image of water. Unlike Mrs. Barton, Eliot's 'dark heroines' struggle with evil in themselves. They are rebellious, angry and complaining. Their inner lives are always depicted as images of water. This is Eliot's recurrent way of representing the emotional life of the dark heroine, a pattern that emerges for the first time in "Janet's Repentance". Here, I focus on Eliot's use of water imagery to represent Janet's emotional life and discuss the relationship between water imagery and her mental growth.

When Dempster begins to drink more heavily and starts his ill treatment to Janet worsens, Eliot depicts Janet's as follows:

Janet's soul was kept like a vexed sea, tossed by a new storm before the old waves have fallen (266).

The "vexed sea" represents the explosive nature of Janet's bitterness and hatred. Indeed, Janet can't contain her anger and commits her first act of resistance to Dempster soon after. After Janet is shut out of the house by her husband and takes refuge with a friend, she remembers the existence of Tryan and begins to imagine relying on him. Her state of despair and her hope are compared to bitter and sweet waters:

Her life was a sun-dried, barren tract, where there was no shadow, and where all the waters were bitter. No! She suddenly thought—and thought was like an electric shock—there was one spot in her memory which seemed to promise her an untried spring, where the waters might be sweet (280).

Until Janet confesses to Tryan, she doesn't have an outlet and lives in an isolated, dangerous situation. But during her confession, she clings to Tryan's advice and appeals to him for rescue. Then, she finds a slight hope for the future. Here Janet's attitude is again conveyed by water imagery. Eliot compares Janet to one drowning and Tryan to a rescue craft.

But now he turned his eyes on her, and they met hers, fixed on him with the look of rapt expectation, with which one clinging to a slippery summit of rock, while the waves are rising higher and higher, watches the boat that has put from shore to his rescue (289).

Like Janet's struggle to end her isolation, her struggle with the temptation to drink is also rendered in water. After Dempster's death, Janet finds a half full of decanter of pale brandy which Dempster's habitual drink in his bureau. At the moment, "An impetuous

desire shook Janet through all her members" (320). The temptation for drink comes to her again. Her hand is on the decanter and is lifting it out of its niche unconsciously. But she comes to herself and dashes the brandy to the ground. She wants to "lash the demon out of her soul" (321). But she is at a loss and is upset to think that:

She would slip back again into that deep slimy pit from which she had been once rescued, and there might be no deliverance for her more (321).

However, Janet decides to go to Tryan and confess all to him again. As soon as she talks about her alcoholic temptation and despondency, she feels half her burden removed. When Tryan speaks words of consolation and encouragement, Janet believes in the message of mercy. In this situation, Eliot depicts Janet's newfound soul:

the water-floods that had threatened to overwhelm her rolled back again, and life once more spread its heaven-covered space before her (322).

In this way, the power of Janet's temptation is compared to a flood while the danger of slipping back into drinking is compared to drowning. As she gradually leaves behind an old life and begins a new one, learning to avoid alcohol with help of Tryan, she overcomes her temptation. She couldn't pray alone before, but now "[Tryan's] prayer bore her own soul along with it" (322). After their conversation, Janet discovers religious faith. Janet goes out into the dewy starlight. Tryan offers to walk her home, worrying about the late hour. But Janet decides to go home by herself. On the way home, she feels "The Divine presence" (323) near her. Now her stormy mind becomes peaceful. In the image of a baptismal font, Eliot suggests that Janet's spirit is renewed.

That walk in the dewy starlight remained forever in Janet's memory as one of those baptismal epochs, when the soul, dipped in the sacred waters of joy and peace, rises from them with new energies, with more unalterable longings (323).

Janet didn't have her own ideas and always relied on someone else. But now, she finds a new way of life and comes out of her despair. She decides to work for love and mercy; her days fill up with social intercourse and charitable exertions. Eliot refers to Janet's tremendous change directly:

Janet Dempster was a changed woman—changed as the dusty, bruised, and sun-withered plant is changed when the soft rains of heaven have fallen on it—and that this change was due to Mr. Tryan's influence (326).

It is clear that through Tryan's influence, Janet's soul has been purified and restored. Janet continues charitable labor and brings up her adopted children by her own volition even after the death of Tryan.

In this way, Janet's inner life is associated with images of water through out the novel. This pattern of Eliot's depiction continues in her later 'dark heroines'. The title character of *Romola* (1863) is another dark heroine, and is similar to Janet. Kristin Brady remarks "Romola's marriage looks backward to Janet Dempster's physical abuse and forward to the disastrous marriages of Dorothea Brook and Gwendolen Harleth."¹³ Like Janet, Romola is unhappy in her marriage life. Romola discovers her husband Tito's calculating character and his secrets after the death of her father. In her anger, disillusionment and despair, she attempts to leave Florence. However, this attempt is interrupted by Savonarola who offers a new concept of devotion to humanity. Romola is influenced by Savonarola and sometimes consults with him about her sufferings. But when Savonarola refuses to save Romola's godfather from execution, she despairs again. This time, Romola decides to leave Florence. In this situation, her mind is depicted like Janet's "vexed sea", "It seemed to Romola as if she were in the midst of a storm-troubled sea" (498).¹⁴ After *Scenes of Clerical Life*, sea and river are influential places for 'dark heroines'. Water is used not only the metaphorically but also literally. In fact, Romola sets out to sea in order to let destiny decide whether or not to end her life. She drifts away in a boat and lies down to sleep. Eventually, she awakes on the boat and discovers a village stricken with the plague, where she is forced to help the sufferers. Her awakening on the boat represents her awareness of a new way of life. Romola changes her mind by drifting out to sea, and like Janet, she decides to devote her life to charitable labor.

These examples show that there is a deep relationship between the 'dark heroine's' mental growth and images of water. As water brings "fertility, energy and refreshment",¹⁵ these women fulfill the potential of their power after a struggle with evil. Eliot uses water to suggest Janet's rebirth into a new life. Water imagery also underscores the changed figures of Romola and Gwendolen. Their minds are also restored, and their setting out to sea conveys their new ways of life and their independence. By water, women are freed from a limited and conventional world of the typical Victorian woman. Eliot uses water imagery not only to represent 'dark heroine's' feelings and their mental growth but also catalyst for freedom.

V. Conclusion

In examining Janet's transfiguration in the novel, we discover a new heroine that deviates from the fixed heroine imagery of the Victorian period. Eliot breaks with tradition in showing a new type of woman who doesn't remain an "Angel in the house". Eliot was convinced that women could never recover their energy and recoup their power unless they

embarked on a conquest for their true selves. This is why the 'dark heroine's' transfiguration is one of Eliot's recurrent theme in her novels. To depict this transfiguration, Eliot often uses "Medusa" and "water" imagery and we can see this pattern of depiction through out her novels. As "Imagery is one of the dominant modes of the authorial voice",¹⁶ Eliot also reveals the 'dark heroine's' suppressed anger and protest through images. Eliot's 'dark heroine' is a complex figure, however, the 'dark heroine's' transfiguration restores not only power but compassion. The more each heroine suffers, the more she understands the power of "sympathy" which she learns to spread through world around her. Thus the 'dark heroine' embodies Eliot's search for balance between power and gentleness, self and others.

Notes

1. Merryn Williams, *Women in the English Novel, 1800-1900* (New York: Macmillan, 1984) p.140.
2. Ibid.
3. George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000) Hereafter all page references will be included with in the text.
4. Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) p.33.
5. In a Greek myth, Athena turned Medusa into an ugly Gorgon in her jealousy.
6. K.M. Newton., *George Eliot* (London, New York: Longman, 1991) p.33.
7. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982) p.9.
8. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin Books, 1995). Hereafter all page references will be included with in the text.
9. Kanako Yamaneki, "The Dual Structure of Adam Bede: Realistic Novel and Myth", *The George Eliot Review of Japan* 2 (2000) p.28.
10. Neil Roberts, *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and her Art* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Press, 1975) p.61.
11. Ed. Gordon S. Haight, Vol. 3, *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven and London, 1954-6 and 1978) p.111.
12. Neil, *op.cit.*, p.62.
13. Kristin Brady, *George Eliot* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992) p.127.
14. George Eliot, *Romola* (London: Penguin Books,1996). Hereafter all page references will be included with in the text.
15. Catherine Neale, *George Eliot: Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) p.122.
16. Ibid.

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