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MRS. TRANSOME AND 'DESECRATED SANCTITIES'

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As George Eliot's Introduction to Felix Holt would lead one to expect, the crux of the tragedy which this novel embodies is the "pity and terror" evoked by the "downfall of blindly-climbing hopes", rather than mere peripeteia – the 'discovery' of Mrs. Transome's guilty past. As always in her novels, the tragic reversal that really matters is not an external incident: it is internalised and is closely linked with moral 'recognition'. Mrs. Transome's agonised consciousness of her violated conscience, which the reader shares all through, is a prominent element in her suffering. The scene in the White Hart (Chapter 47) does not take the attentive reader by surprise; for not only does the Introduction hint that there were "fine stories" concerning Transome Court, but Chapter 1 comes very near disclosing that these stories related to Mrs. Transome. Even the negative touch of Mr. Transome shrinking at his wife's approach "like a timid animal looked at in a cage where flight is impossible" is not without its implications. When Mrs. Transome hears the church bells announce the arrival of Harold in the village, she sits "still, quivering and listening, her lips became pale, her hands were cold and trembling". Surely something more is implied than just Mrs. Transome's apprehensions of difficulties in adjusting with a son who is returning home (like Harry in The Family Reunion)¹ as a stranger. Mrs. Transome's forlorn hope of happiness also is strongly suggestive of there being something questionable in her past:

Could it be that now... she was going to reap an assured joy? – to feel that the doubtful deeds of her life were justified by the result, since a kind Providence had sanctioned them?

The continual evocation of Mrs. Transome's terror doubtless points to something sinister. As soon as her eyes meet Harold's "the sense of strangeness came upon her like a terror". Close upon its heels follows a more daring clue: Harold no longer resembles her very much

and she would not have been able to recognize him in a crowd as her son, but his appearance would have struck her with "startled wonder", for "the years had overlaid it with another likeness which would have arrested her". An inescapable deduction stares one in the face: Harold's appearance would have reminded Mrs. Transome of someone other than her husband.

There are other comments in the chapter which should make a reader attuned to George Eliot's novels alert even on first reading:

It had come to pass now - this meeting with the son who had been the object of so much longing; whom she had longed for before he was born, for whom she had sinned. . . few words had been spoken, yet with that quickness in weaving new futures which belongs to women whose actions have kept them in habitual fear of consequences. . .

Even Harold seems to have a vague consciousness that there is something amiss but does not realize its significance. To the reader, however, coming along with many other allusions in the same chapter, this is an important clue: "You've not got clumsy and shapeless," he tells his mother. "How is it I have the trick of getting fat? . . . I remember my father was as thin as a herring."² After this he goes in to meet his father. Mrs. Transome's reactions to her son's words is revealing: "She was not given to tears; but now, under the pressure of emotion that could find no other vent, they burst forth. She took care that they should be silent tears." A sentence after this we read: "Her part in life had been that of the clever sinner. . . And besides, there were secrets which her son must never know." The chapter closes with a haunting image of terror for which Mrs. Transome's ostensible situation as a woman whose son wants to take things into his own hands is palpably inadequate:

They never said anything like the full truth about her, or divined what was hidden under that outward life - a woman's keen sensibility and dread, which lay screened behind all her petty habits and narrow notions, as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may lie crouching behind withered rubbish.

The last sentence in the chapter depicts Mrs. Transome as almost resigned to something ineluctably calamitous:³ "The best happiness I shall ever know, will be to escape the worst misery", she says to herself bitterly. This is echoed at the end of the story, when she becomes morally certain that Harold has become acquainted with her secret:

When she saw Harold, a dreadful certainty took possession of her. It was as if a long-expected letter, with a black seal, had come at last. (Ch. 48)

Nowhere else in George Eliot is terror so palpable as in the part of Felix Holt which relates to Mrs. Transome. Her fear of social consequences (including Harold's reaction) is but one element in this terror, and not the most important element. There are two distinct strands in Mrs. Transome's pity-arousing terror - an anguished terror of the past, and an apprehensive terror of the future. This fact stands out in the passage which describes her reaction to the first tacit confrontation between Harold and Jermyn:

Her hands were cold, ... she seemed to hear and see what they said and did... and yet she was also seeing and hearing what had been said and done many years before, and feeling a dim terror about the future. (Ch. 2)

Pity and terror are evoked also by Mrs. Transome's agonized helplessness before her son (as also before Jermyn). She is uncertain of Harold's feelings and possesses no 'key' to his nature:

The finest threads, such as no eye sees, if bound cunningly about the sensitive flesh... may make a worse bondage than any fetters. Mrs. Transome felt the fatal threads about her, and the bitterness of this helpless bondage mingled itself with the new elegancies of the dining and drawing rooms... Nothing was as she had once expected it would be. (Ch. 8)

This is not the only instance of Mrs. Transome's awareness of a reversal even at this stage of the story. She has always been conscious that her affair with Jermyn has degraded her morally, even if its social

consequences remain hidden. "If I sinned," she tells him in Chapter 42, "my judgement went beforehand - that I should sin for a man like you." Jermy's selfish insensitivity is nemesis enough: "There is heroism even in the circles of hell for fellow-sinners who cling to each other in the fiery whirlwind and never recriminate" (ibid.).

Mrs. Transome has always had the small consolation of uttering her moans before a pitying Mrs. Denner, "the hard-hearted godless little woman" (Ch. 1) whose love for her mistress is boundless. She now has a forceful mediator in Esther, who sees "the dimly suggested tragedy of this woman's life" (Ch. 50). She says to Harold: "I think I would bear a great deal of unhappiness to save her from having any more" (ibid.). At the intercession of this Athena the Furies relent towards both Mrs. Transome and Harold. The son and the mother return home after an expiatory journey. Mrs. Transome dies redeemed - even socially (pace Carroll): "Mrs. Transome died there. Sir Maximus was at her funeral, and throughout that neighbourhood there was silence about the past" (Epilogue).

Carroll's essay on Felix Holt is a fine study of that 'organic nature of society' which is integral to George Eliot's vision of life. However, he goes on to maintain that in Felix Holt George Eliot "reverses (her) favourite theme of the search for an ethic and depicts a whole world in which society is seen as Nemesis pursuing and punishing those individuals who refuse its claims. One is the theme of worship and high endeavour, the other of sacrilege and punishment. The god in each case is society" (p. 248). Carroll recognises as "one of George Eliot's supreme achievements" the depiction of "the faded Mrs. Transome at Transome Court still living by the creed she has defiled" (ibid.) From Carroll's viewpoint what has been 'defiled' is the social code, and he has no doubt the following passage of the novel in mind:

She had never seen behind the canvas with which her life was hung. In the dim background there was the burning mount and the tables of the law; in the foreground there was Lady Debarry privately gossiping about her... she lived, poor

soul, in the midst of desecrated sanctities, and of honours that looked tarnished in the light of the monotonous and weary suns. (Ch. 40)

Carroll restricts himself to the 'foreground', regarding Lady Debarry's gossips and honours that are tarnished as the most important factor in Mrs. Transome's tragedy. Everything in the novel points the other way - to the 'dim background' where keen sensibility and dread lie crouching behind the withered rubbish of petty and narrow notions, to 'the burning mount and the tables of the law', and the 'desecrated sanctities'.

Fred C. Thomson maintains that Felix Holt is a 'classic tragedy'⁴. It is ironical, however, that throughout his essay he turns to George Eliot's "Notes on the Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy in General"⁵ for support, forgetting that in the 'Notes' even where George Eliot speaks about Greek tragedy she makes it clear that her findings are applicable to all tragedy. The specific resemblance with classic tragedy that he discovers is in "such stock devices of Greek tragedy as the 'recognition' scene" (p. 85). The stock recognition scene of Chapter 47 has a lesser bearing on Mrs. Transome's tragedy than another recognition scene, in the opening chapter, where Mrs. Transome sees the 'hated fatherhood' of Jermyn asserted in Harold's appearance. Thomson seeks support for his view in the fact that George Eliot's Journal records her readings (in most cases re-readings) in classic drama and the Poetics in 1865. This is of questionable value since George Eliot first read the Poetics in 1856 and had read a lot in Greek drama (and reviewed Antigone), even before she wrote Scenes of Clerical Life.

Thomson finds the classicism of the tragedy to consist also in "the relative compactness of the time scheme, a major feature of classic tragedy" (p. 89). His conclusion is the best comment on the faulty criteria which he brings to bear upon the analysis of this tragedy:

If George Eliot was deliberately trying to adapt the functions and techniques of Greek drama to the

novel, it must be conceded that she fell short of her aim. The total impression left by Felix Holt is rather of Elizabethan luxuriance, with an injection too, one fears, of grand opera. (p. 90).

This is a palpably unfair line of criticism. Thomson first sticks on the novel a label of his choice and then finds fault with the novel for not conforming to the label.

In several respects Felix Holt is fundamentally different from classical tragedy. Unlike in typical Greek tragedy, reversal does not descend upon Mrs. Transome suddenly at the climactic moment, it is one of the given elements in the situation. In addition to the instances cited already, from Chapter 1, we see her awareness of a reversed state of affairs depicted in Chapter 2:

There were piteous sensibilities in this faded woman, who thirty-four years ago, in the splendour of her bloom, had been imperious to one of these men, and had rapturously pressed the other as an infant to her bosom, and now knew that she was of little consequence to either of them.

There is another fundamental difference between classical tragedy and Felix Holt. An authorial comment in Chapter 40 brings out the nature of this difference, at the same time as it underlines what is common to all human experience:

Even the patriarch Job, if he had been a gentleman of the modern West, would have avoided picturesque disorder and poetical laments; and the friends who called on him, though not less disposed than Bildad the Shuhite to hint that their unfortunate friend was in the wrong, would have sat on chairs and held their hats in their hands. The harder problems of our life have changed less than our manners; we wrestle with the old sorrows, but more decorously.

Oedipus the King ends with the discovery of an unwittingly sinful relationship. Jocasta comes to know the truth suddenly and commits suicide soon afterwards, and Oedipus gives vent to his sorrow in laments loud and long. Harold and Mrs. Transome must bear their sorrow silently and in secret:

He looked still at his mother. She seemed as if age was striking her with a sudden wand - as if her trembling face were getting haggard before him. She was mute. But her eyes had not fallen; they looked up in helpless misery at her son. (Ch. 48)

Oedipus runs in search of Jocasta, sword in hand. Harold turns away from his mother in pitiless silence, only to relent and return to sit by her an hour later. This gesture of compunction has no doubt been facilitated by Esther's compassionate suggestion: "O, I think I would bear a great deal of unhappiness to save her having any more" (Chapter 50). And "the dimly-suggested tragedy" (ibid.) of Mrs. Transome's life enables Esther to reject the "silken bondage... and... well-cushioned despair" (Ch. 49) of Transome Court and escape a similar doom. This brings in "the consolatory elements"⁶ so integral to George Eliot's conception of tragedy.

NOTE: Dr. Kakar has underlined certain words/phrases for emphasis in quotations from Felix Holt. (Ed.)

Notes

1 T.S. Eliot's play bears a startling resemblance to Felix Holt. Both works present a humanized version of the Orestes myth. In each case the mother is disappointed to see that her son has returned as a stranger. Both Harry and Harold make 'undesirable' marriages and lose their wives abroad. Both Amy and Mrs. Transome have symbolically murdered their husbands. In each case the son learns the truth from a third person. Only in their ending do the two works differ - Amy dies of shock and Harry alone goes abroad again to expiate the mother's sin. Mrs. Transome accompanies Harold, who has forgiven her, and returns to die at Transome Court.

2 Harold spreads out his plump hands as he asks this. When Jermy is first introduced (in Ch. 2), attention is drawn to his "white, fat... hands", which he is in the habit of rubbing gently. Harold notices that his own hands are soft and dimpled like Jermy's, and that he also has the habit of rubbing them.

3 David R. Carroll, in his influential essay "Felix Holt: Society as Protagonist", NCF, XVII (December, 1962), 237-52, holds a different view: "The tragedy of her position is conveyed initially without explicit comment on her past, and our awareness develops through dramatic hints and juxtapositions until everything is suddenly made clear" (p.248). Carroll continues: "The actual moment of revelation comes... in Chapter vii, and it provides an excellent example of George Eliot's methods" (p.249). Carroll's essay is hereafter cited in the text by referring to the page no. only. Unascribed underlining and ellipses are throughout mine.

4 "Felix Holt as Classic Tragedy", NCF XVI, No. 1 (June, 1961), 47-58, rpt. William Baker, ed., Critics on George Eliot (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 84-91. Citations in the text refer to Baker.

5 "Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy in General", George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals, ed. J. W. Cross, New Edition, Edinburgh and London, n. d., pp. 424-428.

6 *Ibid.* p. 427.