

Mirroring Mothers: Self-Identity and the Maternal Threat in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*

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Abstract

An analysis of the character Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1868) as reflections of the Victorian preoccupation with narcissistic women. The two women, at first glance very different, highlight the psychological relevance and significance the mirror holds for the works themselves and the mirror's wider social implications.

Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portrait *Lady Lilith* (1868) are, at first glance, an incongruous pairing. Eliot's heroine is a simple, yet 'distractingly pretty'¹ country girl, a mere seventeen-year-old, who falls victim to the seductions of the local gentry and ends the novel exiled, though not executed, for the murder of her illegitimate child. The story, though set in 1799, was inspired by recent true events² and tapped into the public's fascination with the overblown sense of 'mass infanticide'³ during the 1850s into the 1860s. *Lady Lilith* is the "modern" version of Lilith from Talmudic legend. She is Adam's first wife, before Eve. She is sumptuously attired, or in fact, in a state of dishabille, in what appears to be a private boudoir. What links these two women is the mirror. This 'proverbial emblem of female vanity'⁴ is given a distinctly modern feel by both Eliot and Rossetti. Though *Adam Bede* and *Lady Lilith* both predate psychoanalytic theory, examining aspects of the works through this lens highlights surprising similarities, particularly in respect to maternity, reflecting contemporary social anxieties and conditions.

Nineteenth-century debate over the "woman question" attempted to define *woman*, her duties, her character and her biology (including sexuality). The ideal Victorian woman was pure, passive, frail; a 'paragon of self sacrifice'⁵ and 'self-renunciation'.⁶ Her existence was defined in reference to her husband.⁷ The denial of self, and the physical isolation of fulfilling domestic duties (including maternal duties)⁸ as the 'angel in the house'⁹ led, however, to the perception of woman's 'constitutionally inverted identity'.¹⁰ Women were 'self-contained, unindividualised'¹¹ and depicted as circles, the moon, Diana and, significantly, mirrors. These associations reinforced the desired reflectivity and responsive traits of the ideal, beautiful woman. In a perversion of this, however, 'the altruist [became] an egoist', a Narcissa, consumed with her 'own fulfilment'.¹²

¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by M. Reynolds (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 91.

² See Reynolds' introduction in Eliot, p. XV.

³ Rosemary Gould, 'The History of an Unnatural Act: Infanticide and *Adam Bede*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 25 (1997), pp. 263-277, (p. 265).

⁴ J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 139.

⁵ Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts* (1851), quoted in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siecle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 9.

⁶ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), quoted in Dijkstra, p. 13.

⁷ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England, Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), quoted in Dijkstra, p. 9.

⁸ See Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 134 on women as moral guides to their husbands and children.

⁹ Coventry Patmore, quoted in Dijkstra, p. 18.

¹⁰ Dijkstra, p. 74.

¹¹ Dijkstra, p. 129.

¹² Dijkstra, p. 147.

It is against this backdrop that Eliot presents Hetty Sorrel in the 'reifying language of men about women'.¹³ This seventeen-year-old, orphaned beauty is infantilised and likened to the nature surrounding her ('kittens, or very small downy ducks').¹⁴ Her round, fleshy beauty is that of a child, all 'dimples' and 'pouting'.¹⁵ Small fissures in the presentation of Hetty's infantile innocence appear in the description of her (limited) self-awareness: she acknowledges the effects of her beauty on men, treats it as a 'performance'¹⁶ and relishes it with 'cold triumph'.¹⁷ Her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, views her as a 'peacock' with a heart as 'hard as a pebble'.¹⁸

Chapter XV: The Two Bed-Chambers¹⁹ reveals Hetty's true character in front of the mirror, or more specifically and significantly, two mirrors. Her insularity is signalled by her 'always' bolting the door and by the locked drawers of her dresser. She performs her 'religious rites' in front of the mirror by candlelight. Her preference for a 'red-framed mirror without blotches' over the 'tarnished', 'old-fashioned looking-glass' has manifold significance. The tarnished, old mirror, 'fixed in an upright position' cannot be angled to Hetty's desire, to capture the image she requires. In fact, it is uncomfortable to get close to. Hetty first consults the hand-held mirror she purchased secretly and once pleased with her reflection, she puts it down, proceeding with her mission to fashion herself into 'the picture of a lady' she has seen in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room. She may then consult the old mirror which 'couldn't help' returning the 'lovely image'. Hetty is using *her* hand-held mirror first to fix in her mind what she *wants* to see, the imaginary, the result of her primping. Notably her goal is to become an image, not an animate woman, and, significantly, it is an image she connects with her lover, Arthur. La Belle comments on the mirror's 'reflectivity' allowing its viewer to 'see that destiny and transform it into the foundation of their self-conception'.²⁰ The act of mirroring is a process of 'socialisation',²¹ or establishing an identity, she argues, referencing Lacan's theory of "mirroring" in infants. An understanding of this process is important in order to understand Hetty's character, and has further implications for the examination of Eliot's intentions for the novel and its connections to Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*.

Lacan maintains that an infant (up to six months) has a 'unified' image of itself in the mother, a 'fusion',²² and is totally dependent until he becomes the subject in the presence of the mirror, or mother acting as mirror, whereby she reflects back to the infant what he projects. This self-awareness, or recognition of the self as 'I', is also acknowledging the self as 'Other' (in the sense that 'yes, that person over there is me').²³ This fragmentation precipitates the necessity of the split from the mother and facilitates the formation of the 'Ideal-I'.²⁴ A gradual integration into culture and language²⁵ (La Belle's 'socialisation' above) follows, and the 'Ideal-I' is maintained in the 'Imaginary Order', which must be distinguished from 'reality (the fantasy world we convince ourselves is the world around us) and the real (the materiality of existence [...])'.²⁶

¹³ John Goode, 'Adam Bede', in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. by B. Hardy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 28.

¹⁴ Eliot, p. 92.

¹⁵ Eliot, p. 92.

¹⁶ Eliot, p. 93.

¹⁷ Eliot, p. 109.

¹⁸ Eliot, p. 170.

¹⁹ Eliot, pp. 163-5.

²⁰ Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 59.

²¹ La Belle, p. 94.

²² Jeanne M. Willette, *Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage* (Art History Unstuffed, 2013), <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/jacques-lacan-mirror-stage/> [accessed 14 March 2015].

²³ Dino Felluga, *Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development. Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (Lafayette: Purdue University, 2011), <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html> [accessed 14 March 2015].

²⁴ Felluga <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html> [accessed 14 March 2015].

²⁵ Willette <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/jacques-lacan-mirror-stage/> [accessed 14 March 2015].

²⁶ Felluga <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html> [accessed 14 March 2015].



Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith* (1868)

Oil on canvas, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, USA / Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial.
Reproduced by permission of Bridgeman, Image: DAM120705 © Bridgeman.

In Hetty this process appears to have been disrupted. She externalises and objectifies her own fashioned image further ('O yes! She was very pretty...') while simultaneously also internalising it. The narrator notes that during this process of internalisation she has a 'different sensation' from her previous mirror sessions, feeling an 'invisible spectator' resting his eyes on her 'like morning on flowers', in what becomes a perversion of the classic 'mirror-mistress-lover topos'.²⁷ She hears his voice, feels his arms around her, smells the 'delicate rose-scent of his hair'. She internalises her projection of his presence. This is apparent in the use of contemporary female-flower imagery employed for Hetty, which also connotes Arthur's scent (as Hetty perceives it), inextricably linking it to her. She is arrested in her psychological development at the mirroring stage, unsuccessfully integrating the outside world, or the 'real' into Lacan's workable 'reality', but instead basing her sense of self in Lacan's 'Imaginary Order'. She fuses with her fantasy of Arthur, which in itself is an inversion or perversion of the female being reflective: Arthur is imbued with feminine attributes (his 'soft voice' and 'delicate rose-scent').²⁸ Indeed, the narrator's reference to contemporary thoughts on female sexuality ('passion vibrating in return' to the male initiator) is in fact satirised through Hetty's self-referential and narcissistic desire.

Hetty's true nature is revealed to the reader in the presence of two mirrors. Hollander notes that only with two mirrors can the viewer attain 'a true look at the face seen by

²⁷ Elise Goodman-Soellner, 'Poetic Interpretations of the "Lady at her Toilette" Theme in Sixteenth-Century Painting', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 14 (1983), pp. 426-442, (p. 437) [accessed 5 November 2014].

²⁸ See also Eliot, p. 110.

others', in the 'indirect doubled image', which 'cancels the danger and the trap'.²⁹ Hetty, as noted above, of course has no interest in using the mirrors for this purpose and subsequently does not escape the trap. Her "true look", her seeing, is in the seeming. She cannot perceive Derrida's crucial *différance* between what is reflected and what is real.

That the chapter itself constructs a double is, for the plot, significant. Hetty's room is adjoined to Dinah's, providing a mirror, or reverse left-right image, perhaps. When Hetty is seemingly 'captured in the motionless silvered trap',³⁰ Dinah enjoys the 'wide view'³¹ from her window over the moonlit fields. Gilbert and Gubar, in their analysis of another mirror-tale, *Snow White*, might just as readily have been talking of Hetty:

To be caught and trapped in a mirror rather than a window, however, is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self.³²

Chapter XXXI: Hetty's Bed-Chamber,³³ by contrast, forces Hetty into confrontation with the mirror as the unity of the vision with the self is shattered. In this instance, Hetty retires to her room to read a letter Adam has delivered from Arthur. Her narcissism is intact, though vulnerable as the scene opens: the letter has a 'faint smell of roses' (my emphasis). She has a visceral reaction to Arthur's letter of rejection and her 'white marble face' (unlike the 'rose-petal' cheeks of before)³⁴ implies petrification. She cannot see her reflection in the 'old dim glass', which for the modern reader is reminiscent of Freud's theories of the *uncanny* and linked to the fear of castration. La Belle notes the 'disunity' between self and image in the mirror is often the 'beginning of a psychological disorder'.³⁵ Crucially it is in the old family mirror, symbolic of the mother, that Hetty cannot see herself at first. On re-reading the letter, which can be seen to signify Lacan's 'Symbolic field, the field of language'³⁶ (or the layman's "reality"), Hetty sees herself as *other* in the mirror, as she is, not a fantasy version of herself:

It was almost like a companion that she might complain to – that would pity her. She leaned forward on her elbows, and looked into those... eyes...³⁷

Hetty is only now embarking upon Lacan's "mirroring process" through the symbolic mother's mirror. The violence of this separation from her fantasy world is detailed, and of course will continue with limited success throughout the remainder of the novel. Described as a baby 'just beginning to toddle'³⁸ early in the narrative, Eliot effectively undercuts the prevalent desirability and viability of infantilised women, first as psychologically "integrated" adults and then as capable mothers. Hetty is depicted as 'dangerously deviant: unfeminine in her lack of maternal love',³⁹ unthinkable and monstrous to Victorian sensibilities. A modern psychological reading of *Adam Bede* sees Hetty's incompetence, ambivalence and disassociation from the crime and the child itself (as evidenced in her partial burial of the child,⁴⁰ her silence in court and refusal to acknowledge having given birth⁴¹ except in her confession to Dinah)⁴² as reflections of her underlying un-integrated psychological state.

²⁹ Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 393.

³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, quoted in La Belle, p. 9.

³¹ Eliot, p. 171.

³² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 37.

³³ Eliot, pp. 361-3.

³⁴ Eliot, p. 92.

³⁵ La Belle, p. 22.

³⁶ Willette <http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/jacques-lacan-mirror-stage/> [accessed 14 March 2015].

³⁷ Eliot, p. 363.

³⁸ Eliot, p. 92.

³⁹ Gould, p. 272.

⁴⁰ Eliot, p. 493.

⁴¹ Eliot, p. 466.

⁴² Eliot, pp. 490-1.

In Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, a different kind of woman is presented. Far from Hetty's infantile *naïveté*, Rossetti places a rarely represented,⁴³ mythological woman in front of the mirror, or, more accurately, mirrors, in a contemporary boudoir scene. Her altar-like vanity table, complete with candles, is reminiscent of Hetty's place of worship. Lilith is surrounded by reflective and cold silver, glass and polished dark wood surfaces. Rossetti's typical 'floral attributes'⁴⁴ for his women also adorn Lilith, infusing the scene with a luxuriant eroticism. The red of the cut poppy at the bottom right of the painting is linked to her lips, symbolising female genitalia.⁴⁵ The focus is Lilith's languid gaze into the mirror whilst combing her hair. Where movement is necessarily implied, there is an overall sense of stasis and stagnation. The roses from the top right corner seem to have grown around Lilith. The crowded, 'intense'⁴⁶ composition of the painting imbues the scene with airlessness, antithetical to thriving flowers. Rossetti's *Body's Beauty*,⁴⁷ 'in the tradition of the double',⁴⁸ is the accompanying sonnet to *Lady Lilith*. It provides a reflection and expansion of this notion of stasis. Lilith is age-old:

And *still* she sits, young while the earth is old,
And subtly of herself contemplative.⁴⁹ (my emphasis)

'Still' implies lack of motion, but also endurance or continuity. The lack of energy is indicative less of a search or struggle for identity and more of complacency, notably the opposite of Hetty's busy and bustling interactions with the mirror. This complacency is borne out by her rejection of the large mirror (the mother's mirror) and also the angle of her hand-held mirror. The oval shape of the mirror refers to her self-involved narcissism. However, she is not captivated by the image of her face (symbolic of self-knowledge or identity).⁵⁰ On closer examination the mirror is, at least partially, angled to her hair and specifically the hair that has just been combed. Gitter convincingly links weaving and combing hair⁵¹ and notes that the weaving is 'analogous to narrative thread, the story line'.⁵² The viewer's gaze is compulsively drawn to the large screen of hair she is combing out. The metaphor is mirrored and expanded in *Body's Beauty*:

Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.⁵³

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope wove to control her own fate when faced with the prospect of marriage to one of her undesirable suitors. Here, Lilith is presented as knowingly in control of not just her own fate, but, in a more threatening way than Penelope, she is in control of men she ensnares.

Motionless, Lilith looks at the mirror not to construct an identity, but to luxuriate in her power, her control over the fates of others. The mirror fuels her narcissism by reflecting this known power. Additionally, this power redoubles itself by being the agent by which

⁴³ Virginia M. Allen, ' "One Strangling Golden Hair": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66 (1984), pp. 285-294 (p. 286) [accessed 29 October 2014].

⁴⁴ William Michael Rossetti, quoted in Bullen, p. 100.

⁴⁵ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 178.

⁴⁶ Allen, p. 291.

⁴⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Body's Beauty in Ballads and Sonnets*, by D.G. Rossetti, (Chiswick: Chiswick Press, C. Wittingham and Co., 1881), p. 240. <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/2-1881.1steden.rad.html#A.R.78> [accessed 15 March 2015].

⁴⁸ J. Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 29 (1991), pp. 333-349 (p. 336).

⁴⁹ *Body's Beauty*, lines 5-6.

⁵⁰ See Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. by K. H. Jewett (New York: Routledge, 2003) on Platonic eyes as mirrors to the soul, p. 106.

⁵¹ Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, Vol. 99 (1984) pp. 936-954, (p. 936).

⁵² Gitter, p. 938.

⁵³ *Body's Beauty*, lines 7-8.

more victims are captured, and the implication is, fed upon (perhaps through the consumption of sexual energy as implied by the 'straight neck bent').⁵⁴

What becomes apparent through examination of the painting in conjunction with its mirror, *Body's Beauty*, is that, much like Eliot, Rossetti employs contemporary thoughts or imagery in order to undermine their validity. Lilith's initially desirable passivity, her floral accompaniments, confinement in a domestic setting are all myths, ironically dispelled by a mythical woman. In casting off her floral head garland, she is a perversion of the classic Venus, surrounded by mirrors, who wears the wreath as a symbol of her status as the 'ideal lady'.⁵⁵ On closer examination her extreme isolation, the lack of precise or comprehensible physical location (indoors or outdoors?) is disorientating, as is the black background out of which the roses inexplicably flourish. Even the large vanity table mirror reflects an exterior scene, not the interior of the boudoir making it seem like a window.⁵⁶ Lilith has rejected an outward-looking window in favour of an inward-looking mirror. The incomprehensibility of the scene for the viewer has an unsettling maelstrom effect, in which only Lilith's steady gaze at the mirror is fixed: the eye of the storm. The disorientation effect inextricably links the viewer to the scene (as Lilith 'draws men'⁵⁷ towards her). The act of looking at or outwards is reversed and introspection is required by the viewer to an extent perhaps not as urgently demanded in *Adam Bede* by its often unsympathetic narrative voice.⁵⁸

The viewer's gaze is the male gaze, intruding upon an intimate boudoir scene. Made aware of the dangers by *Body's Beauty* (which was engraved on the original frame) the viewer is still unable to avert his gaze, under her 'spell'.⁵⁹ If, as Hollander notes, the presence of two mirrors offers the possibility of 'truth'⁶⁰ perhaps Rossetti shifts the burden of self-identification to the viewer.

Returning to the legend, Lilith is the monstrous mother who spawns demons. She is also a murderer of infants. Though not painted in true profile to produce a physical barrier to the viewer, her ultimate rejection is her refusal to return or "mirror" the viewer's gaze. Her children, lacking "mirroring", exhibit signs of fragmented psychological development as demons. Again the horror of the monstrous mother is evident and compounded by her seemingly serpentine hair, echoed in the sibilline of the eleventh line of *Body's Beauty*: 'And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare...'. She is the Medusa, whose petrifying gaze can be equated to arresting the development of a child, leaving it unable to progress psychologically and integrate effectively into society. Though arguably these images of maternity are subordinated by the overtly sexual nature of the painting (by contemporary standards), they are undoubtedly present and threatening.

The Delphic principle 'Know Thyself' referred to a self-knowledge absent of all 'sensory appearances'⁶¹ of the physical reflection. What becomes apparent in both works is the central role of the mirror to Hetty's and Lilith's identities. Both exhibit narcissistic fascination not just with their beautiful reflections, but with the identities they construct for themselves in front of the mirror. Hetty becomes a fine lady, adorned in jewels and silks and Lilith replenishes her power over men through the magic of her "woven" hair. Notably their regenerative energies, their fertility even, are focused inward, despite abundantly fertile, natural surroundings. Their beauty belies their barren interiors. Of

⁵⁴ *Body's Beauty*, line 13.

⁵⁵ Goodman-Soellner, p. 440.

⁵⁶ Hillis Miller, p. 334.

⁵⁷ *Body's Beauty*, line 7.

⁵⁸ For discussion of narrative voice in *Adam Bede* see Catherine R. Hancock, ' "It was Bone of Her Bone and Flesh of Her Flesh, and She had Killed It": Three Versions of Destructive Maternity in Victorian Fiction', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 15 (2010), pp. 299-320; and Mason Harris 'Infanticide and Respectability: Hetty Sorrel as Abandoned Child in *Adam Bede*', *English Studies in Canada*, Vol. 9 (1983), pp. 177-197; and Gould.

⁵⁹ *Body's Beauty*, line 13.

⁶⁰ Hollander, p. 393.

⁶¹ Melchior-Bonnet, p. 105.

course, both are mothers, but murdering mothers; mothers who damage their offspring. Eliot and Rossetti present these women with varying degrees of sympathy. Hetty is, if not forgiven for her crime, spared execution. As an 'abandoned child' herself, 'just at the infantile beginning of consciousness',⁶² her crime, though morally unambiguous, is a result of her psychological underdevelopment. At the mirror, Hetty is searching for an identity, but without the formative mother's mirror, she is left without the 'needed internal structure'⁶³ and unable to integrate her fantasy self with reality. Eliot uses Hetty to reflect Hayslope's failure and, on a wider stage, to force the viewer to re-examine contemporary debates over infanticide and the importance of the maternal to the contemporary psyche. Lilith's mirror gaze is different: it is part of her appeal. Rossetti acknowledges the paradoxical attraction of the self-involved, rejecting woman. The male viewer craves the fulfilment, the reassurance, of Lilith's (the mother's) formative gaze, all the time knowing it will annihilate him. Lilith, of course, has had no mother of her own, like Hetty, and is presented therefore as lacking maternal instinct and compassion. She exists solely in the unreal boudoir of the artist's imagination versus Hetty's very realistic rural setting, based on a real case, most likely reflecting their creators' intentions for interpretation. Rossetti undoubtedly intended Lilith to be representative of the 'libidinal force, disruptive of social and family stability'⁶⁴ of the New Woman, though arguably Rossetti's anxiety lay in her implications for him personally rather than on a wider social scale. Additionally, what links the two works is their complex exploration of the psychological implications, on a personal and public scale, of women in front of the mirror. They eschew the simple explanation of vanity, before even the publication of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and encourage deeper analysis. Hetty and Lilith's beauty is a foil for their true interiors. Appearances are deceptive. The message is clear: know thyself through, and not just in, the mirror.

⁶² Gordon S. Haight, quoted in Harris, p. 180.

⁶³ Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, quoted in Peggy F. Johnstone, *The Transformation of Rage. Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁶⁴ Bullen, p. 134.

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