

A Study of *Romola* by George Eliot

— About Romola and Tessa —

by Hideo Takano

Tessa is a minor character in *Romola* but her existence greatly influences the story in terms of expressing Romola clearly. Romola and Tessa are the two prominent women characters, whose contrast is great. George Eliot's novels are generally based upon the form of "development or contrast or symmetry."⁽¹⁾ The heroine Romola has various painful experiences, but Tessa does not seem to. There are many different points between them. It's that Romola will be able to look at the world from various points of view, although Tessa won't be able to. Tessa's way of thinking will remain unchanged till the end of the story. George Eliot tries hard to depict the characters with their own firm principles. In the world there are many kinds of people good and bad, innocent and intelligent. The world is full of the severe struggles of principles even though they are hardly understood easily. It is so complicated, but we must live in it with the firm principles, otherwise we tend to live like a floating cloud in the sky: through Romola and Tessa, George Eliot seems to directly suggest to us how to get enough knowledge to realize the peaceful life with good firm principles.

Romola's life is very similar to Tessa's in the beginning of the story.

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Tito's bright face showed its rich-tinted beauty without any rivalry of colour above his black *sajo* or tunic reaching to the knees. It seemed like a wreath of spring, dropped suddenly in Romola's young but wintry life, which had inherited nothing but memories—memories of a dead mother, of a lost brother, of a blind father's happier time—memories of far-off light, love, and beauty, that lay embedded in dark mines of books, and could hardly give out their brightness again until they were kindled for her by the torch of some known joy.(2)

Romola's "young but wintry life" implies her monotonous life throughout the books. Romola is so deeply impressed by Tito that her life seems to shift to the spring from the winter. Romola's father is a blind scholar. Romola has worked as his secretary. Her life is as narrow as her father's in social activities. Romola's wintry life has much emphasis. Her "memories of far-off light, love and beauty," are described about her present situation. Romola's memories of beauty are found in her father's books. Romola needs Tito's existence like a paradise for her. So Tito may be taken for the torch. Romola naturally believes Tito's words even though her Godfather declines to accept Tito for her husband.

'Now, godfather,' said Romola, shaking her head playfully, 'as if it were only bright eyes and soft words that made me love Tito! You know better. You know I love my father and you because you are both good, and I love Tito too because he is so good. I see it, I feel it, in everything he says and

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does. And if he is handsome, too, why should I not love him the better for that? It seems to me beauty is part of the finished language by which googness speaks. You know *you* must have been a very handsome youth, godfather' — she looked up with one of her happy, loving smiles at the state-ly old man — 'you were about as tall as Tito, and you had very fine eyes; only you looked a little sterner and prouder, and —' (p.251)

Romola has not known about his wicked mind yet. She believes in him only in appearance and words. She should have seen through him but he doesn't want her to get married with him. "It seems to me beauty is part of the finished language," — this sentence means that beauty is quite helpful for her to believe Tito. Romola is still greatly influenced by Tito's beautiful appearance and words. Romola is still ignorant of the worldly life underlying Tito. She believes that all beautiful persons around her seem to her to be good at heart. Romola is a very sincere, faithful person. If the time stopped here at this moment as in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Tito's beauty would last for ever and Romola would agree to the phrase "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." But Time doesn't stop in reality. Romola has to live through severe reality to be wise enough to recognize Tito's real thought underlying his beautiful face and words. She is willing to have a positive look at Tito from her point of view. After all it is because of her ignorance that Romola is manipulated by Tito. In this sense Romola is very similar to Tessa.

Prior to Romola, Tessa appears first before Tito in the chapter of "A Breakfast for Love." She comes out with her mother though Romola has

no mother. Tessa seems to have the same impression about Tito as Romola:

'Tito Melema, aged twenty-three, with a dark, beautiful face, long dark curls, the brightest smile, and a large onyx ring on his right forefinger.' (p.164)

In the chapter of "First Impression" Tessa's conception of beauty and ugliness can be distinctly recognized in the following sentences:

'We have a garden and plenty,' said Tessa, *'and two cows, besides the mules; and I'm very fond of them. But my father-in-law is a cross man: I wish my mother had not married him. I think he is wicked; he is very ugly.'* (p158)

'Pretty little Tessa!' said Tito, smiling at her. *'What makes you feel so safe with me?'*

'Because you are so beautiful — like the people going into Paradise: they are all good.' (p.158)

Tessa's way of looking at beauty or ugliness is mainly based on the beautiful or ugly appearance. She is ignorant enough to miss the inner substance behind appearance. Tessa looks at Tito's beautiful appearance distinctly, and perfectly believes him, although she is an object of his own pleasure. She doesn't see through Tito's wicked mind at all. Tito's beautiful face and kind words move her so much that she becomes submissive to him as if she were his puppet. "My father-in-law is very ugly," — this sentence directly indicates Tessa's reluctant heart for him. The outward and inward world look the same to her. Tessa is a poor wretch-

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ed girl but she is a very faithful girl for Tito like Romola. Tessa is the object of Tito's pleasure, and Tito's love for her is superficial. There's no struggling triangle love affair among the three. Tessa is too ignorant to be equal to Tito and Romola. Romola will see through Tito later. There are various kinds of people in the world. George Eliot wants to depict them as exactly as possible. Tessa's ignorant concept of beauty and ugliness always seem to remain unchanged to the end of the story. Her way of living in a sense is simple but happy because she doesn't suffer from Tito's wicked deeds so much. She believes him so sincerely that she doesn't doubt him at all. Tessa is not a major character in the story but a very important woman to clear up the images of Romola.

She was too happy to go to sleep—too happy to think that Tito would wake up, and that then he would leave her, and she must go home. It takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry bank. The fretted summer shade, and stillness, and the gentle breathing of some loved life near — it would be paradise to us all, if eager thought, the strong angel with the implacable brow, had not long since closed the gates.

(p.161)

"It takes very little water to make a perfect pool for a tiny fish, where it will find its world and paradise all in one, and never have a presentiment of the dry bank, "— this sentence describes Tessa's life, compared with Romola's. Why is Tessa described in such a way? George Eliot's

true aim to write novels is, first of all, to look at the world as it is. Tessa's inner movements of her mind are not so clearly illustrated, but her way of living can be read in the above-mentioned sentence. The image of paradise is sure to depend on each person. Paradise here is rather apart from Christian paradise. Each person has his image of paradise. Tessa tries to get married with Tito. They have two children. Tito doesn't love her so much, but Tessa loves him so much as to feel as if she were in paradise. It is quite important to make Tessa's way of thinking quite clear. Tessa can be said to believe in the phrase "beauty is part of the finished language by which goodness speaks." Tessa doesn't seem to try to see how complicated the world is. Through various typical types of characters, the author makes every effort to describe the world illustratively.

Tito felt an irresistible desire to go up to her and get her pretty trusting looks and prattle: this creature who was without moral judgment that could condemn him, whose little loving ignorant soul made a world apart, where he might feel in freedom from suspicions and exacting demands, had a new attraction for him now. She seemed a refuge from the threatened isolation that would come with disgrace. He glanced cautiously round, to assure himself that Monna Ghita was not near, and then, slipping quietly to her side, kneeled on one knee, and said, in the softest voice, 'Tessa!'

She hardly started, any more than she would have started at a soft breeze that fanned her gently when she was needing it. She turned her head and saw Tito's face

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close to her: it was very much more beautiful than the Archangel Michael's, who was so mighty and so good that he lived with the Madonna and all the saints and was prayed to along with them. She smiled in happy silence, for that nearness of Tito quite filled her mind. (p.201)

Tito's position at Tessa's home is as comfortable for him as a paradise where he could forget anything inconvenient for him. Tito's home is like a paradise for Tessa. There, she is perfectly happy with a lot of smiles, enjoying her life with him. Her paradise consists of Tito's lies in a sense. If Tessa were as sensitive as Romola, she would feel quite disappointed and unhappy about him like Romola. Tessa's world is as narrow and small as to be unaware of the truth about him. Whatever he may be, she feels happy as long as he does not forsake her.

In the further development of the story Romola and Tessa's way of thinking are to be clearly distinguished. Their fundamental differences in thinking about the world will be made clearer. First of all Tessa's relation with Tito and Romola will be scrutinized in terms of Nemesis and the image of web.

As long as Tessa is concerned with Tito, she had better not know the truth, but this world doesn't always go so far as to make him happy. The author tries hard to describe persons like Tito to make one aspect of society clear. Eliot doesn't forget her own suggestion even in such a paradise-like scene of Tito's in connection with the image of web.

Poor little Tessa had disappeared behind the curtain among the crowd of peasants; but the love which formed one web

with all his worldly hopes, with the ambitions and pleasures that must make the solid part of his days—the love that was identified with his larger self—was not to be banished from his consciousness. Even to the man who presents the most elastic resistance to whatever is unpleasant, there will come moments when the pressure from without is too strong for him, and he must feel the smart and the bruise in spite of himself. Such a moment had come to Tito. There was no possible attitude of mind, no scheme of action by which the uprooting of all his newly-planted hopes could be made otherwise than painful. (pp.207 ~ 208)

The existence of “Poor little Tessa” is necessary to find out Tessa with the author’s point of view. Tessa and Tito are to be objectively looked at. Tito’s real state of mind for Tessa should be understood if she wished to see the total vision of their relationship. “The love which formed one web with all his worldly hopes,” suggests her being caught by Tito’s worldly pleasure. Tito could be compared to Spider. She may be regarded as a butterfly in the web. Her total vision will be clear through Tito. In this sense, Tito’s wicked behavior is the clue to the precise approach to learn what she is. Through Tito she is found to be very ignorant, as Tito begins to feel painful even in his secret life with Tessa. Her love for Tito is so perfect that she can’t doubt him at all. This way of thinking doesn’t change till the end of the story. The more clearly his unfaithful feeling is revealed in the development of the story, the more ignorant Tessa looks. And her love for him seems to be more perfect. Tessa always welcomes him, being quite obedient to him. Here the image of web is emphasized:

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But he had spun a web about himself and Tessa, which he felt incapable of breaking: in the first moments after the mimic marriage he had been prompted to leave her under an illusion by a distinct calculation of his own possible need, but since that critical moment it seemed to him that the web had gone on spinning itself in spite of him, like a growth over which he had no power. (p. 369)

The outward power has made him anxious about his power over her. The web has begun to be spun in his unexpected way. "The pressure from outside" has brought him the more complicated unsolvable web. He really recognizes the severe reality. His limit of power in a sense leads one to think how unexpectedly the world moves. Tito also seems to start to be caught by the more complicated web of reality. Tessa has been persuaded to observe Tito's words:

Tessa sat on low stool, nursing her knees, for a minute or two, with her little soul poised in fluttering excitement on the edge of this pleasant transgression. It was quite irresistible. She had been commanded to make no acquaintances, and warned that if she did, all her new happy lot would vanish away, and be like a hidden treasure that turned to lead as soon as it was brought to the daylight; and she had been so obedient that when she had to go to church she had kept her face shaded by her hood and had pursed up her lips quite tightly. (pp. 362-363)

"A great temptation had laid hold of Tessa's mind; she would go and take that old man part of her supper, and talk to him a little." (p.362) Tessa's "great temptation" has driven Tito into the difficult corner. After all, it is her innocent conduct that prevents Tito from spinning his web as he likes. In this sense Tessa's role is thought great in the development of the story. Her comprehension is not so deep as Tito's. Then on the contrary, her misconduct is so interesting and unexpected that Tito can't catch up with her. It is her perfect ignorance that drives her into the offense against Tito's words. She is so ignorant that she perfectly loves Tito.

Love does not aim simply at the conscious good of the beloved object: it is not satisfied without perfect loyalty of heart; it aims at its own completeness. (p. 320)

Tessa believes him even though she is secretly cheated. Her ignorance also helps Romola notice Tito's secret.

As for Romola, her spiritual process toward a peaceful life will be depicted, without the image of web. Her way of thinking is mainly based upon perfectionism in her own love and the concept of Nemesis will be clear.

Romola is so complicated, and cultivated that her attitude toward Tito is very delicate. As for Tessa, she has no incidents to prevent her from being willing to get married to Tito. On the contrary Romola has some incidents which foretell her wretched marriage with Tito. In addition she is in some pain before getting married to him. Her conception of marriage is very different from the ordinary one:

Everything I had felt before in all my life—about my father, and about my loneliness—was a preparation to love you. You would laugh at me, Tito, if you knew what sort of man I used to think I should marry—some scholar with deep lines in his face, like Alamanno Rinuccini, and with rather grey hair, who would agree with my father in taking the side of the Aristotelians, and be willing to live with him. I used to think about the love I read of in the poets, but I never dreamed that anything like that could happen to me here in Florence in our old library. And then *you* come, Tito, and were so much to my father, and I began to believe that life could be happy for me too. (p. 239)

“Some scholar with deep lines in his face, like Alamanno Rinuccini, and with rather grey hair, who would agree with my father in taking the side of the Aristotelians and be willing to live with him.” — this sentence reminds one of Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Dorothea wants to get married with the scholar like John Locke.⁽³⁾ She succeeds in the marriage with Casaubon as she has expected but she comes to learn the painful disillusionment of him owing to his dull life. She can't follow him at all and tries to divorce herself from him. It's the same to Romola; Tito's image is an ideal one for Romola but later, she also experiences disillusionment. Dorothea has her sister Celia. The existence of Celia is as interesting as Tessa in the role of the heroine's supporter. Her role as Dorothea's supporter is so excellent that Dorothea's total image can be clearly described. The human relationship among the characters; Dorothea, Celia,

and Casaubon, or Romola, Tessa, and Tito are always dependent upon each other so much that one should understand each character through the others rather easily.(4) In addition Eliot's form of writing characters will lie in such a way as their way of thinking and living is so egoistic that it is easy to create the images of her character in a realistic sense. "Everything I had felt before in all my life about my father and about my loneliness—was a preparation to love you,"—this sentence means Romola's whole intention being devoted to Tito. Her perfectionism in love for a sincere man remains unchanged till the end of the story. Under the chapter of "The Tabernacle Unlocked," Romola's love for Tito has come to an end. This chapter is very short but the contents is quite fatal for Romola. She tries to cut out everything connected with Tito. In the previous chapter Romola snatched the ring from her finger after a terrible pain. Then in this chapter, she first of all looks at the tabernacle whose picture she is quite familiar with by "the triumphant Bacchus, with his clusters and his vine-clad spear, clasping the crowned Ariadne ····· Foolish Ariadne!" (p. 397) Romola takes the crucifix given by her brother and hangs it round her neck. "Tito, my love for you is dead; and therefore, so far as I was yours, I too am dead." (p. 398) Romola writes a letter to her Godfather saying " ····· I cannot bear my life at Florence. I cannot bear to tell any one why." (p. 399) Romola has been patient with Tito. She knows his wicked conduct against Baldassarre. Tito tries hard to hide it but in vain. Now Romola is no longer so ignorant as Tessa. She can't forgive Tito. Why does she decide to leave Florence? Why can't she bear her life at Florence? Because of her perfectionism.

She had been strong enough to snap asunder the bonds she

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had accepted in blind faith: whatever befell her, she would no more feel the breath of soft hated lips warm upon her cheek, no longer feel the breath of an odious mind stifling her own. (p. 400)

It is Tito's wicked conduct that drives her out of Florence. Her despair as a result of lost love is so great that the whole life around her turns to be a disgusting place. Romola happens to meet Savonarola when she leaves Florence but she is persuaded to stay in Florence. The following scene is that Romola speaks to Tito before she is actually going to leave it.

"..... As long as you deny the truth about that old man, there is a horror rising between us: the law that should make us one can never be obeyed. I too am a human being. I have a soul of my own that abhors your actions. Our union is a pretence—as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage.' (p. 567)

Romola's way of living lies in the straight path of sincerity. She should sometimes have thought of Tito's way of living in a different point. She suffers from the pain so deeply that her insight into the truth is utterly sharp. Tito doesn't change his way of living toward Romola. There's the deep gap between them. As the times go, it becomes wider and wider, because their way of living remains unchanged. Romola is disappointed at Savonarola because of the accident of her Godfather's death sentence. She can no longer believe him. Her Godfather's death has driven her into

deep despair. She leaves Florence, finds out her new life in a strange village, and returns to Florence.

Her indignant grief for her godfather had no longer complete possession of her, and her sense of debt to Savonarola was recovering predominance. Nothing that had come, or was to come, could do away with the fact that there had been a great inspiration in him which had waked a new life in her. (p.652)

Romola looks at the total vision of Savonarola. She herself gets aware of her own egoistic way of thinking.⁽⁵⁾ She begins to see the world in a different way. The new life is what Romola has wished for. She has learned to try the perspective sight of a person without being too passionate to look at him or her. After all through Savonarola and Tito, Romola has come to live a peaceful life. She has decided to support Tessa and her children and to live together with them. In the Epilogue there is a peaceful scene in which Romola tells Tessa's child about how to live to be a great person.

And remember, if you were to choose something lower, and make it the rule of your life to seek your own pleasure and escape from what is disagreeable, calamity might come just the same; and it would be calamity falling on a base mind, which is the one form of sorrow that has no balm in it, and that may well make a man say, — "It would have been better for me if I had never been born." I will tell you some-

thing, Lillo.' (p. 675)

Romola suffered from the lost love for Tito and the broken heart for Savonarola. Through the severe experiences Romola has reached her peaceful life as Silas Marner does. Through Eppie, Silas knows and recovers his own humane life. Eppie is like an angel for Silas. But there has been nothing like an angel for Romola. Romola's new life comes from her positive inner struggle to find out her justifiable life. She is confident of her instruction for Tito's child: namely what Romola puts much emphasis on is the concept of Nemesis.

Conclusion

In the second time when Romola decides to leave Florence because of Tito's betrayal caused by his secret life with Tessa, Tessa's innocent conduct to get acquainted with Romola is Romola's trigger to leave Florence. In a sense, Tessa's innocence is the most powerful weapon to drive Tito into the most painful straits. Tito, Savonarola, Baldassarre are all philosophers but their way of living is just the same as Tessa's in terms of human life. Innocent persons are sometimes happier than intelligent ones. The artist, Cosimo says, "Fowls cackle, asses bray, women chatter, and philosophers spin false reasons — that's the effect the sight of the world brings out of them." (p. 234) Compared with the philosophers' life, Tessa's seems happier, although she is too ignorant and innocent. This is quite cynical. George Eliot's spirit of "Nemesis" is sure to lie in it. As the story goes, the image of web or complicity begins to expand in parallel. The spirit of "Nemesis" will secretly underlie the image. It is closely con-

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nected with the image of the river. The stream of human feelings seems to flow like a visible river, which could be compared to "Nemesis." The typical example of it is the river on whose bank Tessa and Baldassarre die alone because of their wicked will. Tessa's cunningly strange misconduct gives a great shock to Tito.⁽⁶⁾ Tessa always follows him without any interference or objection.⁽⁷⁾ On the contrary Romola is too moral, rational, intelligent to keep silent at Tito's deeds. Her fundamental principle is nourished in her close life with her father. It is the spirit of justice. Whatever she may do she can't help living according to it. It is Romola's fundamental spirit of justice or sincerity that is closely connected with "Nemesis." It is derived from George Eliot's concept of new humanism.

Like so many later writers, George Eliot is concerned with the problem of a humanity without a providence. She turned from her deeply emotional attachment to Christianity for intellectual reasons common in her time and ours, but eventually, after a painful interval, brought her early faith and fervour to her new humanism. Basil Willey has suggested that, like Feuerbach, whom she translated, she turned from God to Reason, and from Reason to Man.⁽⁸⁾

Notes

- (1) cf. Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot* (A Signet Classic, 1965) p. 1.

I have however interpreted formal power as widely as

possible since it is in this case, as in most others, difficult to abstract strictly formal features like development or contrast or symmetry from such things as plot and character and language.

- (2) George Eliot, *Romola* (The Penguin English Library, 1984) pp.105-106.

Further references to this novel will be parenthetically cited in my text.

- (3) cf. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (The Penguin English Library, 1984) pp. 42-43.

How very ugly Mr Casaubon is!

Celia! He is one of the most distinguished-looking men I ever saw. He is remarkably like the portrait of Locke. He has the same deep eye-sockets.'

'Had Locke those two white moles with hairs on them?'

'Oh, I daresay! when people of a certain sort looked at him,' said Dorothea, walking away a little.

'Mr Casaubon is so sallow.'

'All the better. I suppose you admire a man with the complexion of a *cochon de lait*.'

'Dodo! exclaimed Celia, looking after her in surprise. 'I never heard you make such a comparison before.'

'Why should I make it before the occasion came? It is a good comparison: the match is perfect.'

Miss Brooke was clearly forgetting herself, and Celia thought so.

'I wonder you show temper, Dorothea.'

'It is so painful in you, Célia, that you will look at human beings as if they were merely animals with a toilette, and never see the great soul in a man's face.'

'Has Mr Casaubon a great soul?' Celia was not without a touch of naïve malice.

'Yes, I believe he has,' said Dorothea, with the full voice of decision. 'Everything I see in him corresponds to his pamphlet on Biblical Cosmology.'

'He talks very little,' said Celia.

'There is no one for him to take to.'

(4) cf. *The Novels of George Eliot, op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

She shows all the human variables: the successes as well as the failures, the mixed cases, even the unacted possible lives that haunt all our commitments. The result is moral definiteness, maybe, but it is also human movement. We are left the impression, after reading one of her novels, that this is as close as the novelist can get to human multiplicity—that here form has been given to fluidity and expansiveness. We can trace the form as we can trace a diagram but the form is always there in the interest of the human picture.

- (5) cf. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Within the great event and the large group, she is always interested in individual man, sometimes energetic and powerful, often dwarfed, frustrated, and alone. He is placed in history and in society, given his local colour—in the most precise sense of the term—but emerges primarily as a moral being. The human progress is seen as the movement towards the loneliness and aggressiveness of self-regard, or towards the humane and warm acceptance of one's private case as part of the human lot. The human process at its most hopeful is seen in terms of the tragic education of the egoist. Meredith says at the beginning of *The Egoist*, 'The book of this earth is the book of egoists', but George Eliot uses the word and perhaps shows the case more often than Meredith.

- (6) cf. *Romola, op. cit.*, p. 546.

No guile was needed towards Tessa: she was too ignorant and too innocent to suspect him of anything. And the little voices calling him 'Babbo'¹ were very sweet in his ears for the short while that he heard them.

- (7) cf. *Ibid.*, p. 503.

So that in the dream-like combination of small experience

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which made up Tessa's thought, Romola had remained confusedly associated with the pictures in the churches, and when she reappeared, the grateful remembrance of her protection was slightly tinctured with religious awe—not deeply, for Tessa's dread was chiefly of ugly and evil beings. It seemed unlikely that good beings would be angry and punish her, as it was the nature of Nofri and the devil to do.

(8) *The Novels of George Eliot, op. cit.*, p. 233.