The Constancy of Hetty

Olive Smith

My own particular pleasure in this small exploration in the three earliest novels of the delicate web of sensitivity that is Hetty has been in observing how, in the scheme of the whole Chronicle, Henry weaves a tapestry of parental influences that shape the mind and spirit and character of Phillip.

From a wealth of marvellous extracts – which of themselves led me to so much admire this delicately-crafted handling of the personalities of Phillip's parents – I have chosen a few that are vivid illustrations holding a special appeal for me that I invite you to share.

Henry firmly establishes Hetty as a girl who was deeply loved by her family:

> *Sarah smiled at her younger daughter, thinking that she was but a child still, with her gay little laugh, sudden as the song of a jenny wren; a child soon to bear a child, what a sweet little mother she would be.*
>
> *There was no doubt but that Sarah, though she dearly loved all her children, had an especial tenderness for Hetty, who from her earliest years had always been so sympathetic, so easily moved to laughter or tears.*
>
> (Dark Lantern, p. 245)

In *The Dark Lantern* , a beautiful balance is created between Richard and Hetty, our sympathies being caught by first one, then the other. Both had tyrannical fathers. Richard's unhappy childhood is only briefly mentioned, but Hetty has terrified experience of her father's rages; and we are drawn into her fears, and comprehend them, very fully, as we read of Thomas Turney's reactions and physical violence towards her over Richard.

Hetty had great tenderness for people and animals – do you remember her distress over the butterfly that she could not bear Richard to capture and suffocate "just because it was beautiful"?

And, on their way to their honeymoon cottage,

> *When they reached the brook he went first over a plank, and asked her to give him her hand.*
>
> *"Now come over steadily. Take your time. Mind the obstruction at this end. Step high over it."*
>
> *She crossed the plank safely, but her skirt caught in the obstruction, and there was a tearing noise.*
>
> *He was all anxiety. "Now what have you done to yourself? I begged you to go carefully!"*
>
> *"Yes, dear, but it doesn't matter. I can sew it up when we get in."*
>
> *"But you cannot arrive 'all taggled and torn', like a gipsy." He put down the two bags he was carrying.*
>
> *"We should have got married by ourselves, as I wanted to, then we could have arrived by daylight, in more suitable garb. These clothes are quite unsuitable for the country, you know."*
>
> *"Yes, dear, I thought so, but the others liked them." As though in reply a sudden harsh chattering came from the ground near her feet. She moved in fear beside him.*
>
> *"What is it, Dickie?"*

"A stoat caught in the gin."

"Oh, Dickie, a trap?"

"Yes, that is why I asked you to step high over it. There is a tunnel trap at the end of the plank."

There was a rattling of chain on iron, more chattering. "

the poor creature! Who put the trap there?"

"The keeper. Stoats and weasels go down a drain if they come to one, after rats and mice, and the keeper knows it. There is half an old pail nailed to the plank, a gin inside. I expect he gets all the stoats that come this way, as they usually cross a stream dry, if they can."

"Oh, what shell we do, Dickie?"

"I know what we must not do, and that is to interfere with another's affairs." He picked up his hat, and smoothed it with the arm of his frock-coat.

"But the poor thing must be in agony, to cry out like that," she said, clasping her hands tightly.

"Well, try and release it, if you want a bitten finger, and a septic wound."

(Dark Lantern pp. 113-114)

I feel that my whole deep appreciation of Henry's methods of contrasting these two ill-starred, badly-matched young people is centred on, – and was triggered off by, – the anguish I felt for Hetty during this marvellously-written honeymoon chapter.

In it, we have their first meal together and the establishing of their lifelong conflicting attitudes towards one another; – Hetty's abjectly apologetic anxieties over what she guiltily and unhappily regards as her wifely inadequacies, and Richard's inability to cope with or conceal his miserable irritation with her.

At the beginning of the meal she felt like crying; it was all so strange, so different from what she had imagined. Praying that her feelings would not overcome her, she poured out a cup of tea for him.

He waited for her to fill her own cup, then sipped his own. He spluttered, "Dash it, I have burnt my lips! I am used to putting in my own milk after *the tea is poured."*

"Oh dear, I am so sorry. I quite forgot you liked a lot of milk. Your poor mouth!"

"Oh, it is nothing, my own carelessness."

She saw him biting his lip, and was overcome with shame. No wonder he had not wanted to kiss her, ever since the marriage. And now – she bent her head, and wept.

"Oh come! Please! You are overwrought. Drink your tea, there's a good girl. Well, it is a nice comfortable little room, what do you think?"

"Yes, it's very homely, dear," she replied, in a little voice, and trying to smile. Oh, Mamma, Mamma, are you happy? she cried within herself.

(Dark Lantern pp. 114-115)

Henry takes great pains to give us solid and powerful reasons for Hetty's nervous anxiety to avoid displeasing the men she loves. He traces her own mother's similar efforts to placate her father in intricate detail – as for instance in Sarah's preparations for Hetty's birthday party – and he reinforces this with both women's very real and accurately-grounded fear of Thomas Turney's temper and violence.

When the glass was about half empty, Sarah, who had been sitting quietly with her hands folded on her lap, ventured to ask again how business had gone that week. Hardly had she spoken, when she regretted it; for she did not want Tom to think about Hughie

and so get upset. She had hoped against hope that Hughie would have been a great success, then it would have made it easier for her to tell Tom, whose temper at times she dreaded so much, what she felt could not be kept from him any longer. Indeed, mother and daughter had been discussing it with increasing dread and anxiety all that day. What time would be the best to tell Papa? If too early, it might spoil the party: but then, if later on, when Papa had drunk some wine, well – If the next morning, might he not have a liver? And then, would it best if Hetty went away and Mamma told him? But might that not make him the more angry? Hetty, though not a Catholic, had prayed on her knees to the Virgin Mary, praying that Papa would not be angry, and so make her mother cry, for it was of her darling Mamma that Hetty was thinking nearly all of the time, if Papa were to get one of his terrible rages.

Sarah had tried many times to reassure herself that the best way to start to tell Tom was first to explain that as Hetty was now twenty-six, and being, as Tom well knew, a girl of the most beautiful and steadfast spirit, as the Mother Superior had told him when they had gone to fetch Hetty away, as he would remember – that Hetty would never do anything wrong, she always thought of others before herself —

But at this point, invariably, Sarah's rehearsal of an imaginary plea to Tom broke down, The trouble-scene just before Charlie had left home came back to her. For Tom had struck her in the face, a thing which she had not minded for herself but for what had followed – the terrible fight between Tom and Charlie, that she could not bear to think about.

(Dark Lantern p. 147)

Henry also frequently shows how Hetty's unnocent and girlish sense of fun grates on Richard and so, sadly, ruins so many of their tenderer moments together; and this is balanced by Richard's increasingly unkind habit of belittling Hetty and "putting her down", as when he has left Doggett's and joined the Moon Fire Office:

His ease of manner encouraged her to say:

"Have you found a billet? In the Moon?"

"What do you think? I will give you three guesses."

"Oh, I daren't think you have, if you haven't! I do hope so, anyway."

"Well, I will not beat about the bush, although I am the new man in the moon," he laughed. "I have secured a post there! But at a smaller salary, and so we shall have to draw in our horns."

"Of course we must, dear!"

Hetty began to laugh, seeing a picture of long horns on Dickie's head slowly receding inch by inch into his head, until only two small nobs were left. Her own horns would be black and curled up, or perhaps with a little wriggle, like a corkscrew. Hetty laughed and laughed, leaning on the table. A little man inside Dickie's head was winding in his horns, turning a handle. The man in the moon!

"Oh come, share a joke with a fellow, do!"

"It's nothing, Dickie, really, it's so silly!" And she had to sit down, for she was aching with laughter. The man in the moon, beating about the bush, with his lantern and doggett! Doggett, a little dog! Oh, she was so relieved that he had got a post, she could laugh at anything!

"It is no laughing matter, really, as you'll find when your housekeeping allowance is reduced. You are *keeping your accounts, are you not?"*

His tone sobered her. "Oh yes, of course, naturally, Dickie."

"I shall have to audit them for you one day." At this Hetty felt a stir of fear. She knew that arithmetic was not her forte, *and also she had mislaid her penny account. book.*

(Dark Lantern pp. 280-281)

One of the most delicately-crafted and painfully detailed descriptions of the lack of ease or happy communion between them occurs when Hetty, who is expecting the birth of Phillip and is feeling ill, has seen the big trout.

"Your fish must have come out of a mare's nest!"

"Really, Dickie, I did see one."

He peered again, searching the flow, his sight adjusted to detect the least shadowy stir or slightest variation of hue in water which might mean the submerged back of a fish.

"That little kingfisher is not likely to have disturbed a trout of any size. I expect you imagined it."

"I did see one, truly, ever so spotty, like currants."

"Are you sure it was not an old currant pudding floating down, thrown away by one of the lunatics in the grounds through which the river flows here? Come now, how big was it, really?"

Hetty held out her hands. "It was quite as long as this, really it was."

"What, you ask me seriously to believe that a trout two feet long, which would mean a weight of five or six pounds, can exist in this little brook! Still, one could live in the millpond, I suppose, and grow to that size. Perhaps what you saw was a pike. I expect there are several in the pond. Do you know what a pike looks like?"

"Isn't it a sort of alligator, or some such thing?"

"Well, an alligator is a reptile, and not found in England outside of zoos and aquaria, while a pike is a fish – though he looks rather like an alligator."

"Yes, dear, that's what I mean."

"Well, you said 'sort of alligator', which means a kind of species of alligator, which has legs; while a fish has fins."

"Yes, of course, naturally," said Hetty. "How silly of me."

"Not 'silly'," replied Richard. "But it is a loose way of thinking, and of speaking. Now you would not call a dumpling a loaf, would you? Though both are made of flour and water."

"Yes, dear."

"Though perhaps some husbands would not be able to distinguish between what was a loaf baked by their wives, and what was a dumpling," he concluded, facetiously. "
well now, where is your famous trout that is a sort of alligator?"

""It was down there," said Hetty, pointing. "I saw it quite distinctly."

"Perhaps it was an hallucination! Perhaps you have caught the habit from the lunatics inside there!" He was joking; but his words terrified Hetty. Something inside her seemed to go thump, as though dropped. She felt sickeningly afraid.

"You are looking pale, Hetty. Do you feel unwell?"

"I shall be all right after a little rest, Dickie. I am so sorry about the fish not being there. Are you serious about the lunatics in the woods here?"

"Yes, it is a private mental home. People suffering from delusions; perhaps your trout is a mental case, too, thinking he is a whale of a fellow."

She had to support herself on the parapet. Had she seen a fish, or only imagined it? Was her mind deranged, from the blow Papa gave her? It was her secret dread that she would become mentally affected, and the baby be born – she dared not think of the word.

(Dark Lantern pp. 374-375)

Time moves uncomfortably on. In *Donkey Boy* the young couple have Phillip to think about – and so do we. The awkward balance continues and develops, but with less insistence in the writing, as Phillip gradually absorbs more and more of our attention. The

routes by which each has arrived at the unfortunate parental positions have been most deftly marked out.

Richard is more and more firmly trapped by his unhappiness, his frustration with Hetty, and his dull life. Hetty, knowing sadly that she can never of herself make Richard happy, in her timid, loving, helpless way endlessly continues to try to please him, and endlessly fails; and we see that Henry in these opening novels has woven and set the pattern for a sensitive child to grow up so repeatedly unhappy, so continually misunderstood.

So much of Hetty's gentleness and love appear in the chapters concerning buying a present for Richard:

> *Hetty cherished the idea of buying him a rifle of his own, which she could get, through the Firm, at trade price.. The only thing that worried her was how could she find out what was the right kind of rifle? Could she approach the Secretary of the Rifle Club, and seek his advice? Would it be etiquette to ask him to keep her request as a confidence? For she must never for a moment put Dickie in a false light, among the other men. But supposing that part of the matter to be all right, and she bought the rifle, would Dickie perhaps feel hurt that she had gone to someone else for information? And in any case, would it, or could it, make him feel small that she, a woman, albeit his wife, had interfered in matters appertaining to a man's sphere?*
>
> (Young Phillip Maddison p. 325)

– and, looking at this later through Phillip's eyes, Henry sums up what I have been attempting to trace like this:

> *For a period, Phillip had dreamed of having the old rifle Mother had bought for Father, for a New Year's present, converted to take .22 ammunition, as Father did not want it. It was an old Martini-Henry rifle, practically a dummy, and used for drill only. Mother had bought it from Peter Wallace's father. Father had made a fuss, as usual, about the Martini-Henry, saying it was a white elephant, and why had she wasted her money, instead of consulting him first? Mother had in the end gone away to be by herself in the front room. When he had followed her there, she said, wiping her eyes. ""I can never do anything to please your Father, Phillip. When the time comes for you to get married, I hope, if only for the sake of your little children, you will think always before you speak! I did not waste my money in buying it, anyway it was my own money, left me by Mamma, and —"*
>
> *Here she had cried again; but was smiling soon, and telling Father that she was sorry she had made a mistake, and would he please buy the right kind at the Stores, and allow her to pay for it? Father had bought himself a .22 miniature rifle, but had insisted on paying for it himself. He had, however, consented to allow Mother to give him, for a present, the brown canvas bag in which it was carried.*
>
> *"Mother has got only a very little money of her own, Phillip. I do not think that she should spend any of it on me. Anyway, your Mother knows that I do not want people to give me presents. I do not deserve them. I am well aware that I am a failure."*
>
> *This admission had no effect on Phillip. Father had said that before; but had remained Father, as before.*
>
> (Young Phillip Maddison pp. 354-355)

There are those that criticise HW's construction of Hetty's character for not "developing" her as a person. In reply I can only speak of my beloved Mother and of a great friend, each of whom had always seemed to me to remain the same and for exactly

the same reasons as Hetty remains the same: that is, they were all good and gentle people who only wished to love and please others and who, within the limited circumstances of their lives, were already "developed".

Goodness is a rare quality and is perhaps less and less easily recognised or even appreciated in our hard and calculating age. Fundamental goodness is not fundamentally changed by suffering or circumstance. It may be tried by fire but if it survives it remains bright. The brightness may be increased but this is not a dramatic change such as is craved by the student of literature who wants to track the writer's craft only through the tragedies and trials of flawed heroes to a final heart-rending change in their natures.

Henry had so many skills and one of the best seems to me to be his superb ability to present Hetty throughout the huge achievement of the Chronicle as a constant. He by no means presents her as perfect: her weaknesses and failures are portrayed with the most minute observation; but in the tortured unhappiness of Phillip's saga she glows with a gentle light of love that nothing can diminish.

Margaret White