

LAMIA: THE ALLEGORICAL NATURE OF HETTY DORVAL

by
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I do not wish to add to the already existing confusion of Ethel Wilson's literary ancestry. What I want to demonstrate is that *Hetty Dorval* yields profundity of meaning if seen in terms of an ancient and central literary tradition — allegory. The book is short, the plot simple, the characters few, the style direct and the point of view uncomplicated. Yet this surface transparency is artful and indicative of the ethical scheme and moral debate which is the real impetus behind the writing of this novel.

That Hetty Dorval is an enigma is insisted upon at several points in the narrative. Half-way through the book, for example, Hetty is related to the "spurious glamour" (p. 35)¹ of the circus and to its central attraction, Torquil the Lobster Boy. Frankie speculates; "Was Torquil the subject of some affliction that separated him tragically from his fellows, or did he put on his snappers in the morning and at night unscrew them and go to bed?" (p. 36). At the end of the book Frankie is still pre-occupied with "what is Hetty?" (p. 88). The relationship between Hetty and Torquil in fact provokes the realization that Hetty is identified with several semi-human creatures well known in myth and legend. I would suggest at least four as being the most obvious and the most pertinent: the Siren, Circe, the Lamia and La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The sirens were beautiful creatures who impeded the evolution of the soul with seductive songs. They devoured their captives. Circe the enchantress turned her captives into beasts. The lamia was a serpent who took the form of a beautiful woman and devoured children. La Belle Dame Sans Merci shared many of these attributes and that Hetty has this allegorical French ancestry is made clear by the final song she sings of "Normandie, c'est le pays qui m'a donné" (p. 90).

I want now to look in greater detail at the book emphasizing the archetypal nature of Hetty, the allegorical nature of the other characters, the ritualistic movement of the action, the emblematic progress of the soul

¹All page numbers are taken from the Laurentian Library Edition of *Hetty Dorval*.

of Frankie and the dominant narrative devices of journey, quest and battle.

With such recognitions in mind even seemingly realistic and trivial details acquire a resonance. In Chapter One a woman who appears to be Mrs. Dorval, but is not, arrives in Lytton accompanied by a dog called Sailor. Circe, of course, turned the crew of Ulysses into animals. The woman who appears to be Hetty is in fact Mrs. Broom because she sweeps up the mess caused by Hetty. But she is also called "Mouse" partly because Hetty is "a human cat" (p. 24) but primarily because witches did not have relationships with humans but with humans transformed to animals or familiars. Hence Mrs. Broom for most of the novel has been annihilated as a person by Hetty Dorval. From Chapter One on she is "the kind of woman that you didn't notice", that "you would never notice" (p. 2). It is only in Chapter 13 that she casts off Hetty's spell, moves "forward out of the shadows" (p. 81) and refuses to follow Hetty's "damned dance" (p. 83) or *danse macabre*. Already the two young girls who curiously observe the arrival of Mrs. Dorval/Mrs. Broom feel the need to "atone" (p. 4) and running along the bank of the dark, dangerous river "recovered" (p. 4) themselves only temporarily for one of them was to drown in it trying to save a dog.

In Chapter Two Lytton is everywhere and Frankie, whose moral progress is one of the major concerns of the book, is Everyman. The father is called Frank and together they are the lack of subterfuge, the directness, the lack of deceit standing in opposition to Hetty Dorval the seemingly beautiful but false Valdor or Golden Vale. Frankie's present routine is ethically precise — the journey from weekends at home with a family which constantly guards against impending chaos (p. 8) to Mrs. Dunne or Donne in Lytton, Ethel Wilson's most consistent mentor.

In the third chapter the precise routine is interrupted and alone in growing darkness Frankie encounters the very stuff of ballad a beautiful lady, "pretty", "very pretty" with a "light voice" (p. 13) on a beautiful horse. The relationship seems "easy" and "natural" (p. 14) because Hetty appears "very pure", "spiritual" and full of "innocence" (p. 14), but has two faces, a "disturbing sensual look" (p. 15), something "over-full" (p. 14). The encounter with the Rev. M. Thompson in the same chapter emphasizes Hetty's "agitation" (p. 17) and her deceptive behaviour for she "looked like a saint in ecstasy" (p. 19). The prayer is pertinent: "We thank Thee for Thy goodness to us in this our pilgrimage on earth. Thou knowest each of us though we are strangers to one another. Thou knowest our secret hearts . . ." (p. 19). The young girl realizes that "something somewhere was not quite right" (p. 26) and the mature narrator understands that she has witnessed a Christian battle: "I think now that there was a burning sort of goodness and directness in Mr. Thompson against which Mrs. Dorval had to defend herself with her weapon of lightness." (p. 20). Hetty "quite

serene now" (p. 20) that Mr. Thompson has left resumes her siren like singing of the wasting power of love. Frankie is completely enthralled and falls under a "spell" and "infatuation", "a novel spell of beauty and singing", a "charm" and a "trance" (p. 21).

It is clear already, though this is the purpose of the next chapter, that Frankie has been separated from her moral centre. Her life appears no longer "natural"; it is "secret" and she is "not as happy" (p. 23). In retrospect Frankie understands that Hetty annihilates people or sheds them like a snake its skin. Though she "looked" like a "princess" (p. 24) "curled up on the couch" (p. 25) she involves Frankie in the "hoodwinking" (p. 24) of Mrs. Dunne, Ernestine, and her Father and Mother. At the end of the chapter Frankie "stealthy", feeling "mean" "Crept along" (p. 27) to eavesdrop on a parody of domesticity between Hetty and Mr. Dorval who of course turns out not to be Mr. Dorval. Most seriously Frankie has placed herself outside the mystic trinity with her parents; "We had always been three, and there was no constraint amongst us. Tonight we were two, and one." (p. 30).

The next scene with its confrontation between Frankie and her parents has a heavy patriarchal emphasis. Here there is something close to an Edenic allegory in the possibility that the Father might be wrong about Hetty who is obviously forbidden fruit.

The seventh chapter is one of transition. Frankie moves from Lytton to Vancouver and prepares to embark for England and Europe. The universal nature of the allegory is stressed from this point on. Hetty is given the abstract name of Menace (p. 43). On pages 46 and 47 Frankie's mother "exorcises the bungalow completely" and "blows Hetty Dorval right out of the house." Frankie is warned by the sagacious Wong who is of course an oracle and therefore speaks a cryptic language: "Large trouble Jap-ann. Large trouble Lush (that was Russia). Large trouble Yulip (Yulip to rhyme with Tulip was Europe). You stay home, I know! I tell you the truth Frankie! But I was nearly sixteen and I did not care about trouble in Yulip."

The sea voyage emerges in terms of birth and delivery and, as we would expect, Hetty is on board. For the first time Frankie's mother sees her and noting how "angelic" and "heavenly" she seems understands what Frankie has found so difficult, that evil is often beautiful and seductive and therefore dangerous. Evil is also ubiquitous for Hetty moves around the world; Shanghai, Vancouver, Lytton, Bath, London and Europe. Hetty here tries to convince Mother and daughter that she has changed, but she cannot and thus becomes Lady Connot. The pun is obvious and later Hetty is seen mourning (very attractively) the death of her husband.

The restaurant scene in Chapter Eleven marks the beginning of Frankie's final battle and victory over Menace. Hetty now threatens Rick and Mollie. Having established that Frankie's mother is absent Hetty's

victory seems obvious. Frankie thinks of her mother as a “dear little dragon” (p. 64), not a very complimentary term on the surface, but then dragons have been much maligned. Originally, they were guardians of temples and treasures and allegories of prophecy and wisdom. Hetty’s “ensnaring business” (p. 65) begins and there are two meals, the literal one and the one in which she is seen digesting or “restfully absorbing” (p. 66) Rick and Mollie. Hetty is also the dangerous rivers of Lytton and Rick and Molly are “succumbing” to the “flowing slow-spoken charm” (p. 65). No wonder Frankie thinks of dogs and we recall the death of Ernestine.

Hetty then is “poison” (p. 69), an “angel face” but a “selfish monster” (p. 72) and Frankie knows now what she is up against as she goes to encounter Hetty for the last time. There is a strong sense of the interior allegorical journey here. The path of Frankie is “frightening” and “unfamiliar” (p. 75) through a dark wasteland where she is “aghast at the pre-vision of craters, rubble and deaths” (p. 75). At the end of the journey is the battle with “the seven devils” (p. 75) of Hetty, her protean nature and her deadly beauty, but Frankie is armed with the “touchstone” of her own moral nature and knows “that Menace was still her true name” (p. 75). Frankie wins her battle over Hetty and even lies in the same bed as her. Hetty “docile as a child” (p. 88) now assumes the “S” shape of her Satanic and snake-like origins, but Frankie knows that to be “moved in pity of spirit” (p. 89) would be a foolish act of compassion.