

Romola: The Failure of a Husband and Triumph of a Wife

George Eliot's *Romola* is a masterpiece independent of all other historical romances set in the Italian Renaissance. Eliot's employs a unique focus on a strong female lead and interesting approach to character development. The intelligent and ambitious Romola, the title character, undergoes significant personality transformations in response to her interactions and relationships with others. As the novel progresses, Romola's personal developments culminate in what is one of the most important relationships that Eliot has crafted: that between Romola and her husband Tito's common law wife, Tessa. Using her unsatisfactory history with Tito himself as an example of what not to do in relationships, Romola forges a bond with Tessa and creates the happiness that her existence has been lacking. In response to Tito's failure to perform as a proper husband for both women, Romola becomes the provider, protector, and companion that Tessa needs.

The factor that most inspires Romola's transformation into a proper spouse figure for Tessa is her failed marriage to Tito. Though Tito is most-often blamed for the disintegration of their relationship, both he and Romola caused significant problems that eventually tore them apart. At the beginning of their romance, Tito brings light and "the warm stream of hope and gladness" to Romola's life, as she later does to Tessa's, by making her feel safe and worthwhile (175). When her father criticizes Romola for having a poor memory, Tito makes her feel normal and that her mistakes are acceptable, much as when Romola interacts with Tessa: she does not make her feel guilty about losing her son, being unable to provide for her children, or for not knowing what to do when faced with social pressures in public. Though Tito and Romola's relationship seems to be highly functional and picturesque, it is actually doomed from the start. Tito makes Romola feel appreciated when they first fall in love, but the two cannot create a functional partnership nor a passion of sufficient strength to maintain their relationship through the troubles that soon arise due to Tito's deception and Romola's high expectations for the future. A lack of trust and communication between the two creates a sharp divide that prevents the existence of honesty and the growth of their affections.

Romola's primary fault is that she desires a perfect relationship, full of love and harmony, but neglects to understand that such perfection is impossible. In her naive state, Romola blames her father's presence for her lack of complete happiness with Tito, not seeing that perhaps their relationship is in need of active support. While Tito has a selfish agenda, Romola is completely

inexperienced with relationships after spending her life in isolation. She is too proud and high-minded in the beginning of their relationship to allow for a deep emotional connection between her and Tito, thus causing him to develop fears of losing her love if she comes to know of his imperfections and moral ineptitude. When the bond between the two starts to diminish due to Tito's secrecy and physical and emotional distance, Romola desperately clings onto Tito and the possibility of happiness despite the "crushing pain of disappointment" of her loneliness. This stifling desperation only leads Tito further to "wince under her judgment" and try to find additional ways to hide his failures (276).

When the first of Tito's betrayals is made known to her, Romola's yearning for connection is "annihilated by the vehemence of her indignation" (285). The sale of her father's library is the harshest blow that Tito could ever inflict on Romola, as "the fulfillment of her father's lifelong ambition about this library was a sacramental obligation for [her]" (245). Tito, who is governed solely by self-interest and self-preservation, doesn't think about how deeply his actions will wound Romola, focusing only on the fact that he desires the ability to be able to flee Florence at will. In response, Romola comes to find herself hating Tito for betraying her and destroying the focal point of the fierce Bardi family pride (285). Romola's fury at the loss of the only source of meaning her life has ever had leads her to make the conscious decision never to forgive Tito nor ever make significant efforts to restore their relationship to its former warmth. Tito, who only cares about having a life in which he is universally adored, finds attempting reconciliation with his wife to be too taxing a chore. As he does with everything, Tito takes the easy way out of his situation by turning to Tessa and their bastard children. Tito cannot stand hatred and wishes only "to have his world once again completely cushioned with goodwill" (306). But as Romola has become incapable of fondness, Tito soon comes to develop "a desire to be free" from her and all of her cold judgment (416). He abandons his duties and loyalties as husband to Romola, completing the nullification of the marriage.

In addition to Tito's unforgivable sale of Romola's father's library, he further betrays his wife by carrying on a relationship with the contadina, Tessa, even when he knows full well that Romola is the woman he loves - at least initially. To Romola, marriage is "the highest bond of all," something pure and sacred that goes beyond the reaches of human action and emotion (500). She expects Tito to be her lifelong partner, always full of love and respect because she feels his goodness "in everything he says and does" when he treats her kindly (191). She sees a

better life with Tito than she has had with her father, and Tito's early interactions with Romola, which were "all gentleness to her and to her father also," promote these beliefs (243). It is the actions that Romola cannot see that expose the sacrilege with which Tito approaches their relationship. Though his heart and mind both believe that Romola is the correct choice to meet his priorities, and he pursues her hand in marriage, Tito still continues his secret romance with Tessa. He even interacts with Tessa on the day of his betrothal to Romola, which is meant to be a sacred time in which he pledges his loyalty to her, not one in which he develops an affair behind her back. He never once tells Romola about the contadina or the common law family they later have together, even when he knows that there is no more love or loyalty between him and Romola. Instead, Tito keeps this affair with Tessa mostly because he has an "unconquerable aversion to anything unpleasant" in the world, and thus makes poor decisions simply to avoid uncomfortable encounters (109). Despite her wishes, Romola is forced to be a good wife to Tito by staying in Florence and supporting his actions, even after he has betrayed her by selling the library, because she truly believes that Tito is not doing anything unholy and wicked. In reality, he has committed an even bigger betrayal than the sale of the library by breaking their sacred matrimony and fathering two children with his common law wife.

Between Tito and Tessa, it is Tito who is most at fault for their dysfunctionality, as Tessa is too inept to have any position of power or real influence in the relationship. After many failed promises to do so, Tito does eventually provide for Tessa financially, thus allowing her to have a home, comfort, and safety. But, he is consistently absent from their relationship from inception to conclusion, and he never truly gives Tessa any real respect or commitment. In their very first meeting, Tito kisses the innocently sleeping Tessa without her consent and takes her breakfast for his own, thus causing her mother, Monna Ghita, to become enraged. Tito's half-efforts to appease Monna Ghita are reflective of his lackadaisical approach to dealing with anybody's problems but his own and taking responsibility for his own actions. Tito selfishly acts on whims, responding immediately to his emotions without considering how he may be affecting others. Unless he stands to gain or lose something, Tito does not care what happens to everyone else and he feels no remorse for acting irresponsibly.

Though Tessa's world revolves around Tito, he rarely gives Tessa the attention she deserves. Tessa adores Tito, constantly following him around "without moral judgments that could condemn him," only looking for love and attention in return (145). While Tito craves the

adoration and “freedom from suspicions and exacting demands” that Tessa provides him and uses her whenever it is convenient for him, he also ignores her when the timing doesn’t suit his preferences because her uninvited presence is “awkward and annoying” (145, 195). First, Tito pretends not to know who Tessa is when she waves to him from the crowd on the day of San Giovanni, and then he later ignores her while walking to the Via di’Bardi with Bernardo Dovizi. Though it is understandable that he does not want a scene to be caused in either case, Tito fails to realize that it is his fault in the first place that there is cause to worry about being seen with the contadina. He is content to spend time with Tessa when he knows that his high society fellows are not keeping a watchful eye, but his reputation is threatened by their relationship when anyone of importance may be present. Yet, by consistently returning to interact with Tessa and by allowing her to believe that they have a strongly developing relationship, Tito fails to draw appropriate boundaries for Tessa’s understanding and allows her to believe that she should be with him whenever and wherever she pleases. His lack of explanations to Tessa regarding their relationship proves to be very destructive to the contadina, whose fragile mind and emotions are constantly being wounded by Tito’s rebuffs.

Further, when he is with Tessa, Tito constantly promises to protect and care for her, but he rarely comes through on these promises. Tito interacts with Tessa because he enjoys having her “adoring him and nestling against him,” but he plays cruel jokes on her, also knowing that she is not smart enough to understand them, such as when he initiates a false-marriage and allows Tessa to consider it to be official and permanent (147). Tito’s tricks lead Tessa to believe that he is going to save her from her sad, humble life by initiating her into a high-class family, but to him, these offers are only things to say for entertainment, “to see what sort of pretty look and answer she would give,” not promises that he actually intends to carry out (109). It is Tito’s nature to recoil from any actual confirmation of responsibility to others, and he only actually follows through with saving her from her stepfather when Tessa’s persistence threatens his carefully constructed reputation. Even when Lillo and Ninna are born, Tito only slightly increases his efforts to care for Tessa. He continues his marriage with Romola, thus preventing himself from being a fully present husband and father for Tessa and the children, and he continues to control Tessa by means of threats and manipulation, creating an environment in which he has “thoroughly frightened Tessa into silence about the circumstances of their marriage” (300). He gives his common law family financial care, but neglects to see them as real

people, but rather more as toys or pets that will bring him short-lived happiness whenever he feels the need.

Whereas in both of his relationships, Tito presents dishonesty, disrespect, selfishness, and irresponsibility, Romola displays only the exact opposite characteristics and proves herself to be far more worthy a human than Tito through her relationship with Tessa. Romola's successful relationship with Tessa is marked by three major events in which she proves her worth, beginning with the intervention during the Burning of Vanities where the two wives of Tito first meet. At the procession, Tessa, who is not used to going out in public alone and has no knowledge of Savonarola's aversions to glamour, is frightened by church boys who demand she hand over her vanities as a sacrifice to be burned on the Pyramid. The vanities, the necklace and belt she wears, are "the only ornamental presents Tito had ever made her," and she clings to them for their material and emotional value (426). Due to her simple mental capacity, Tessa becomes thoroughly confused by the interaction and breaks down in tears, utterly helpless but unwilling to give up the jewelry as it makes her feel cared for, safe, and respected. Tessa believes people will not bother her if they believe that only the wife of a rich and powerful man would be able to obtain such finery. After much confusion, it is Romola who appears with "a gentle hand... and a soft, wonderful voice" to protect her by sending the boys away (430). Romola calms Tessa down and speaks kindly to her, something that Tessa is not used to since her mother and stepfather were emotionally and physically abusive, and Tito controls her through means of intimidation. Romola teaches Tessa how to hide her vanities and leads her home, thus establishing a friendship in which Tessa already expects everything from Romola, her new savior, who has led her to "escape from nightmare into floating safety and joy" (431). Tessa sees Romola as both an angel and the Virgin Mary herself in her habit of applying immaculate religious personas to mortal and imperfect people. Though Tessa thinks Tito to be holy too, for his beauty, there is never a mention of Tito inspiring feelings of such safety in Tessa as Romola does. This exposes one of Tito's failures, as one of the main roles of a husband is that of a protector. Romola fills that role more aptly after a few minutes of interaction than Tito after many months of a relationship.

The second time Romola and Tessa meet is when the former discovers Lillo, the toddler son of Tito and Tessa, wandering the streets after running away from his home. Tessa has fallen asleep and neglected to close the door to prevent Lillo from leaving the building in an act

of characteristic irresponsibility that she later blames on the caregiver Monna Lisa, once more proving her immaturity and lack of ability to care for herself or others. Romola acts again as protector by taking Lillo into her own care and determining to return him to his family out of the goodness of her heart. She displays “ready maternal instinct” and “passionate tenderness” to form a bond with the toddler, who at this point she does not know belongs to Tessa or Tito - though finding out this shameful fact has no negative influence on her strong affections for the child (460). Upon returning Lillo home, Romola does not scare or threaten Tessa as Tito often does, but treats her with care and understanding. In her first act as a father figure for the children, Romola physically takes the place of Tito by sitting in his chair and playing with Lillo as he would, as well as helps Tessa care for the children and patronizes her just as Tito would. At the end of their meeting, she even gives Tessa a lock of her own hair, a traditional lover’s gift, as Tito did. Romola, like Tito, promises she will “always take care of” Tessa when she is in need. Unlike Tito, she actually keeps this promise time after time and intentionally goes out of her way to ensure the safety of Tessa and the children, whereas Tito would leave for so long that Tessa would cry out of despair due to her belief that he would never come back (465). Romola cares for Tessa and the children out of true goodness, respect, and love. Tito only intends to gain easy love and admiration, or to prevent Tessa from making him uncomfortable.

To conclude the significant events in their relationship, Romola finds Tessa upon her return to Florence after caring for the plague-stricken village. The madonna’s first instinct when she arrives in the city and hears of Tito’s death is to search for Tessa and the children to make sure they are okay, rightfully not trusting Tito’s judgments regarding their safety. Though her “awe-stricken grief” has “left her hardly any power of apprehending minor circumstances,” her devotion to Tessa and her promises to protect the family lead her to use all of her free time to track them down (564). When she is successful in reaching Sibilla Manetti’s house, Romola offers to take care of Tessa and the children, to host them in her own home, and always to protect and provide for them, something that she “wish[es] above all things” to do (565). Romola carefully and intentionally thinks through what will be necessary to ensure a good life for her husband’s common law family and makes plans for them. Tito did not even think to make provisions for Tessa and the children if something would happen to him, but left them with “no money, only their clothes, to pay a poor widow with for their food and lodging” (567). His lack of foresight left them in a precarious position, as Tessa is completely unable to take care of

herself, much less Lillo and Ninna. Tito put them in more danger than they would have been in had he not planned to flee Florence with them in tow, but had left them in the house with Monna Lisa. If Romola had not arrived, they would have been left without any protection in a strange area where Tessa had been rendered unable to care for her children out of grief and fear. Tessa would not have known how to live on her own because she would have no means of procuring shelter, food, or money. In addition to being quite unintelligent, she has no skills, no ambition, and a strong aversion to any form of work. All Tessa really has to offer is her young body, which she has no knowledge of being desirable since no one has ever directly told her as much. Romola acts as Tessa's guardian angel and saves her and her children's lives. She displays more loyalty to Tessa than Tito ever had for either women and proves herself to be a far better partner in life.

The household Romola has created in the epilogue is, in its simplest form, a revised and improved version of Tessa's former household. Romola has replaced Tito as a husband for Tessa and father for Lillo and Ninna while Monna Brigida has replaced Monna Lisa. Romola has full charge of the tutoring of the children, providing moral guidance for the family, and managing the spiritual climate of the home, as shown by the shrine to Savonarola. Romola takes care to ensure that every member of the family lives comfortably and is loved, since Tito had previously created two households that failed to do so: one had been cold and full of betrayal, the other characterized by a climate of intimidation. By educating herself to discover what not to do in her future relationships, Romola gains the peace she had once searched for in her marriage to Tito by providing for Tessa and their new family. Tito had been incapable of establishing any real love or happiness in the world, but from his failed relationships came one completely functional duo, led by the now fully capable Romola who perfectly fills the roles of protector, provider, and spouse that Tito could not.