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Thematic and Narratological Affinities in George Eliot's *Felix Holt* and Theodor Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel*

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Abstract

This article investigates affinities in George Eliot's "Felix Holt: the Radical" and Theodor Fontane's "Frau Jenny Treibel." Both texts present suggestive narratological and thematic affinities in how the 19th-century female identity is articulated within the socio-political framework of society novels. This analysis interrogates the boundaries of a 'sentimental education' to uncover deeper layers distinguishing *Bildung* from *Herzensbildung*, thereby placing greater emphasis on women's romantic education in the public performance of identity.

"[T]here is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life..."
-George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical*

*"Männer männlich, Weiber weiblich."*¹
-Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest*

1. Introduction

In a letter from 1870, Theodor Fontane relates an encounter with George Eliot and G.H. Lewes in which he concludes: “They are two geniuses, *she* perhaps even more so than he.”¹ This is no small compliment, considering the high esteem with which Fontane regarded Lewes’s biography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Davis 22). Although Fontane scholars have located only one recorded reference to Eliot’s fiction in his remaining documents (a brief critique of *The Mill on the Floss* in a letter to his wife), her novels were quite well received in Germany and were frequently translated into German shortly after publication. Soon after their British releases came German translations of *Adam Bede* in 1860, *Silas Marner* in 1861, *The Mill on the Floss* in 1861, *Middlemarch* in 1867, *Felix Holt* in 1873, and *Daniel Deronda* in 1876 (Wiebel 201). Considering the ready availability of German editions of her novels and their popularity, it is quite likely that Fontane would have been familiar with several of her works. Despite his being a contemporary of Eliot and even born in the same year, she in turn would not have been familiar with Fontane’s novels, as he did not adopt this medium until later in his life. Born in 1819, Fontane published his first novel *Vor dem Sturm* at the age of 59 in 1878, two years before Eliot’s death (Rignall 166).

Nevertheless, as contemporaries in Western Europe during a time of great social change, several notable affinities emerge in their works. In addition to their shared admiration for Goethe, both authors have produced historical novels that reflect the strong influence of Walter Scott. In Gabriele Davis’s analysis in *Novel Associations*, he identifies several mutual philosophical influences in their works as well, including John Ruskin, Schopenhauer, and Feuerbach. Thematically, however, both authors occasionally adopt similar approaches to addressing social questions of the day. As Davis observes, “the progressive ‘spirit of the age,’ Radical English and liberal democratic German thought thus influenced the two novelists up into the 1850s” (Davis 15). In this comparative reading of Eliot’s *Felix Holt: The Radical* and Fontane’s *Frau Jenny Treibel*, we will consider the narratological devices by which constructed gender identities emerge in these complementary marriage plots.

2. Nineteenth-century familial and social structures

In both authors’ depictions of critical moments in British and German society, they engage with the shifting social norms through the lens of the intimate familial sphere. Treating this space as a microcosm of greater social issues for the day, Eliot and Fontane manage to address the shifting social divisions in both societies as well as the looming “woman question.” In the selected novels, the crisis emerges when the heroines consider a sudden leap in social status through marriage. This particular crisis neatly unites the public sphere with the domestic, allowing the author to thoroughly engage with broader social questions by means of a particularized personal experience.

2.1. *Felix Holt: The radical*

George Eliot’s *Felix Holt: The Radical*, published in 1866, is the broader and more structurally complex work of the two. The novel begins in 1832, soon after the passing of the Reform Bill. The socio-political upheaval of the day is mirrored by the dilemma faced by Esthetic Lyons. Wavering

¹ This analysis will refer to the author, Mary Anne Evans, by her pseudonym in recognition of the name under which her works were published.

between suitors from disparate socio-economic classes, she finds herself caught between social identities. In choosing between the working-class Felix Holt and the aristocratic Harold Transome, Esther faces contingent moral and social questions in the same moment: the riches of the simple life of honest, but regular work are pitted against the allure of a life of leisure and an elevated social position. Hailing from her quiet home in the Malthouse Yard, Esther initially is situated amongst the humble classes who occupy one pole of the novel's broad social spectrum. The Lyon household consists of only the studious minister Rufus Lyon, his adopted daughter Esther, and their servant, Lyddy. Esther's interests and accomplishments reflect her education abroad as well as the pursuits of a woman who has independently furthered her literary and philosophical knowledge with works of her own choosing and without the guiding influence of her mother, who died when Esther was still an infant. Mr. Lyon, who is much absorbed with his preaching and theological studies, did not concern himself with the finer points of Esther's social education.

At the opposite pole of this society is Transome Court. Mrs. Transome is the undisputed ruling force in her home until her son Harold's arrival. After an absence of fifteen years, her son Harold returns to take over the estate and to stand in Parliament as a Radical. Mr. Transome, meanwhile, wanders to the periphery of the narrative for an occasional nap or stroll on the grounds. A similar encounter between two households stretched across a social divide and briefly untied within an unconventional marriage plot will emerge in Fontane's Schmidt and Treibel households.

2.2. *Frau Jenny Treibel*

Theodor Fontane's 1892 novel *Frau Jenny Treibel* centers on the romantic preferences of Corinna Schmidt – daughter of the whimsical Professor Wilibald Schmidt – who wins the affections of Leopold Treibel, the youngest son of a rich Berlin merchant. Although she has long been considered a perfect match for her cousin Marcell, an aspiring archeologist and doctoral student, she instead pursues the life of ease offered by a marriage to Leopold. The elders of the humble Schmidt household and aristocratic Treibel villa both object to Corinna's deliberate seduction of Leopold, thereby earning her condemnation from both social extremes for her flagrant transgression of gender and social norms.

Professor Wilibald Schmidt, frequently engrossed with his studies or political questions, is a worthy counterpart to Eliot's Rev. Rufus Lyon. As members of the *Bildungsbürgertum*,² the Schmidt household is equally humble, but pleasant. Corinna, Prof. Schmidt's spirited and clever daughter of twenty-five, is an excellent match in wits and learning for Esther, however her concern with material externalities is more pronounced and she suddenly pursues these unashamedly, although the reader is left with the impression that this is the first interest she has shown in such luxuries. Their servant Schmolke rounds out the small household, offering humorous homespun wisdom in moments of crisis. Corinna has also been raised without a mother's guidance (although

² Simone Richter offers a succinct account of the various levels of the Prussian *Bürgertum* in the nineteenth century. In this novel, Fontane draws mainly from only two of these layers. The Schmidts hail from the *Bildungsbürgertum*, which she acknowledges as difficult to readily classify: "The level of income varies widely and contrasts with the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* as secondary in importance" (Richter 33). She specifically cites Prof. Schmidt and his nephew Marcell as members of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, which only seems to specify a cross-section of the bourgeoisie that is educated, but with a moderate income. Although both the Schmidts and Treibel (who are from the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* – see note #3) are quite broadly classified under the *Bürgertum*, there is a significant gap between their levels if considered in terms of social connections and income.

her absence is never addressed in the novel), and instead reflects her father's esoteric historical knowledge, quick wit, and odd sense of humor.

Turning to the opposite pole of Berlin society, the magnificent Treibel villa houses an equally small household, but with a noticeably different dynamic. As members of the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*³, they live in comfort and surround themselves with sundry luxuries, including a gray cockatoo, aged cognac, chandeliers, and other expensive trifles of Jenny's choosing. In the Treibel home, not a single decision is made that is not first approved by the Kommerzienrätin⁴ Jenny Treibel, from the seating arrangement for dinners to the minutiae of her twenty-five year old son Leopold's diet. The Kommerzienrat Treibel, sufficiently characterized by his title and thus freed of bearing any other appellation throughout the novel, has learned the wisdom of careful agreement in his years of marriage. He maintains a safe distance from social complications by amusing himself with abstract political experiments in his free time and long strolls around the garden. Although he is much more alert and socially engaged than his counterpart in Eliot, Mr. Transome, he is equally overshadowed by his wife and similarly occupies his time, with the exception of his short-lived dabble in politics. Leopold has shown no will of his own outside of his mother's desires save for a single rebellion, which will be given in greater detail in the analysis to follow. He is hardly a counterpart to Harold Transome, however Corinna's assessment of Leopold's weaknesses will parallel Esther's evaluation of Harold's moral shortcomings.

3. Women's education: *Bildung* and *Herzensbildung*

In Müller-Seidel's analysis of the art of the social novel in Germany, he considers Fontane's careful distinction between *Bildung* and *Herzensbildung*. In addressing the difficulty of finding an equivalent term, he concludes that the full breadth of the German *Bildung* is not sufficiently covered by "education", "instruction", "formation", "culture de l'esprit", "civilization", or "morale" (Müller-Seidel). However, Simone Richter, in her own attempt to address Fontane's concept of *Bildung*, defines this as a "spiritual and inner formation, refinement, a person's inner and spiritual state of being formed, varied knowledge, associated tastes, judgment, sense for value; manners, tactfulness, and heartfelt amicability" (Richter 14).⁵

In addition to this formative education, this second level of education, *Herzensbildung*, is generally translated as "nobleness of the heart," however Richter refines this definition with additional traits identified by Fontane: "understanding, naïveté, naturalness as well as tact and heartfelt

³ Richter defines the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* as comprising "mercantilists, large-scale merchants, and bankers...even until the middle of the century would aristocrats, academics, and higher officials look disparagingly on the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum*. They were labeled money bags – without *Bildung* or culture" (Richter 8-9).

⁴ The title of Kommerzienrat is literally a "councillor of commerce" and was one of the many such titles that were "exceedingly valued in German society." In Zimmerman's notes to his translation of *Frau Jenny Treibel*, he adds that these titles "may identify an actual rank within the government's bureaucratic hierarchy...or they may have been granted by a government for a patriotic action or contribution" (Zimmerman 198). Jenny's title of "Kommerzienrätin" is the feminine form of this title that would have been given to the wife of an official with such a designation.

⁵ "Bildung ist laut Wörterbuch, geistige und innere Formung, Vervollkommnung, geistiger und inneres Geformtsein des Menschen, vielseitige Kenntnisse, verbunden mit Geschmack, Urteil, Sinn für Wert; Anstand, Takt- und Herzensgüte" (Richter 14). All translations of German secondary sources into English are my own.

amicability”⁶ (Richter 4). Richter observes that while *Herzensbildung* was originally a part of general *Bildung*, a tension emerged between the two kinds of education by the end of the nineteenth-century. She notes that *Bildung* even worked to the detriment of this “nobleness of the heart” and that Fontane himself lamented: “This accursed *Bildung* has condemned all natural things to corruption.”⁷

This careful distinction between a socially cultivated education and a sincere development of natural simplicity arises in Eliot’s novel as well. Felix continually reproaches Esther for what he perceives as vain or frivolous preoccupations. In her interest in “externalities” he sees only a lamentable digression from that which is sincere and natural. In both novels, the female identity emerges as a complex and occasionally contradictory mixture of innate nature, acquired knowledge through education, and socially learned behaviors. The various kinds of education that contribute to the development of these social identities will be questioned once the heroines express an identity that is considered incongruent with their social standing. The tension between authentic expression and an artificially constructed identity is often revealed in irrepressible behaviors that are revealed as the heroines project an otherwise highly-constructed public persona.

4. Constructing and performing the female identity

In both works, the dinner table serves as a stage for each heroine to perform a carefully constructed identity in an equally public and private setting. The private sphere of this domestic setting is reinvented as a public space by the presence of guests in both dinner scenes. These moments are particularly revealing in that both spheres that are crucial to the female identity, the domestic and the public, are depicted in the same scene. The tea scene from *Felix Holt* and the elaborate dinner scene from *Frau Jenny Treibel* have been selected as key moments in which the heroines project a highly-constructed identity that flaunts social expectations for women of their social standing and in their respective historical contexts. We will consider the similarities in the mixture of unconscious and deliberate cues that both authors employ to portray these moments of transgression.

4.1. *Felix Holt: The radical*

Beginning with Esther’s first entrance in *Felix Holt*, various sensory cues announce aspects of Esther’s identity in a mixture of both inherent and cultivated behaviors:

“A very delicate scent, the faint suggestion of a garden, was wafted as she went. [Felix] would not observe her, but he had a sense of an elastic walk, the tread of small feet, a long neck and a high crown of shining brown plaits with curls that floated backward – things, in short, that suggested a fine lady to him, and determined him to notice her as little as possible.” (Eliot 67)

As the daughter of a minister, Esther’s refined demeanor and costly adornments are out of keeping with her social status. Her preoccupation with cultivating and maintaining a ladylike appearance in every respect results in an immediate projection of this carefully crafted identity by a variety of means before she even speaks: scent (the delicate scent of the garden), sound (Felix notes her

⁶ “Verständnis, Naivität, Natürlichkeit sowie Sinn für Takt und Herzengüte” (Richter 4).

⁷ “Die verfluchte Bildung hat alles natürliche Urtheil verdorben” (H: IV, IV, 97).

elastic walk, the tread of small feet), and sight (her long neck and shining brown plaits with curls). As they sit down to tea, Esther completes the display of her identity by revealing certain tastes and convictions over the course of the conversation. The revelation of the the innermost composition of Esther's tastes is metaphorically anticipated by Felix accidentally knocking over her work-basket, "dispersing on the floor reels, thimble, muslin work, a small sealed bottle of atta of rose, and something heavier than these – a duodecimo volume" of Byron's poems (Eliot 68). The image foreshadows the conversation to follow, in which Felix perceives only vanity (the bottle of atta rose) and frivolous concerns (the collection of Byron Poems) hidden beneath a façade of respectable femininity (the muslin work, which otherwise would constitute an acceptable preoccupation).

In the exchange that follows, Felix keeps a careful account of all of Esther's perceived shortcomings. Of the many faults he identifies, he particularly focuses on her vanity, both in her personal pride and in her attractive appearance. Upon their first meeting, Felix wonders "How came [Mr. Lyon] to have such a nice-stepping, long-necked peacock for his daughter?" (Eliot 69). At her spirited rebuff of yet another reproach from him, he again reflects: "'A peacock!' thought Felix. 'I should like to come and scold her every day, and make her cry and cut her fine hair off'" (Eliot 72). While Felix's opinions are guided by an esteem of only that which is useful and sincere, his assessment of her vanity is also shared by the congregation of Magna Treby:

"The less serious observed that she had too many airs and graces, and held her head much too high; the stricter sort feared greatly that Mr Lyon had not been sufficiently careful in placing his daughter among God-fearing people, and that, being led astray by the melancholy vanity of giving her exceptional accomplishments, he had sent her to a French school, and allowed her to take situations where she had contracted notions not only above her own rank, but of too worldly a kind to be safe in any rank." (Eliot 75)

In this assessment, Esther's education is blamed for her character; however, rather than lacking in education, she is instead accused of having received the wrong kind of education. In addition to considering the question of what kind of education is considered appropriate for a woman (acquired accomplishments vs. natural simplicity), *Felix Holt* also acknowledges the various abilities and behaviors that were determined by social status, as well. Esther's transgression is a composite of thwarted gender and class expectations. According to the congregation, Lyon's fault lies in allowing her to develop "exceptional accomplishments" and notions that were "above her own rank." Despite Felix's apparent objection to Esther's vanity and tastes, he nevertheless concedes their appropriateness once Esther stands to inherit the Transome estate: "'The first time I saw you, your birth was an immense puzzle to me. However, the appropriate conditions are come at last [...] All your tastes are gratified now,' he went on innocently" (Eliot 435). Although he initially found her assumed identity of a fine lady as "especially offensive" when she was simply a minister's daughter, he now admits without irony or condemnation that this persona is appropriate for an heiress.

However, Esther's complicated heritage and her tenuous placement between social extremes demonstrates how the female identity is socially constructed rather than originating from nature itself. Esther is raised by a minister and believes him to be her father, but learns later that she was born to aristocrats. Further complicating her position are the attentions of two suitors who comes from both social extremes. On account of her now complicated heritage, she is free to enter either

sphere without question. This freedom to choose her social standing undermines all essentialist notions of class. Rather than empowering Esther, however, the situation places her in a dilemma in which she reacts with a certain passivity that will be discussed in greater detail in section IV.

4.2. *Frau Jenny Treibel*

The elaborate dinner scene in Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel* complements the corresponding scene in *Felix Holt* with a similar transgression of gendered societal roles by the heroine, Corinna. Due to her fluency in English and knowledge of English politics and history, Corinna is invited to the Treibel villa as a dinner guest in order to entertain Mr. Nelson, a visiting British acquaintance of the Treibels. Seated between Mr. Nelson and Leopold Treibel, Corinna keeps up a lively conversation full of colorful flourishes, witticisms, and playful boasting. While the young men praise her for her spirit and cleverness, there is already muted disapproval from the aristocratic Hildegard Munk, Jenny's daughter-in-law, whose flashing glance reveals a "trace of resentment at seeing a Berlin woman and a little professor's daughter celebrated in this fashion" (Fontane 33). After indulging in mild teasing of her cousin Marcell, he "half in earnest and half in fun" admonishes her: "Cousin, don't forget that a representative of another nation is sitting by your side and that it is more or less your duty to set a good example of German womanhood." She responds in kind, declaring: "And to show that in spite of my eternal prattling I still have a feminine nature and am a genuine German, Mr. Nelson should know that I can cook, sew, and iron besides, and that I've learned invisible weaving in the Letter Institute." Despite this attempt to demonstrate her feminine nature, she coquettishly flirts with both Mr. Nelson and Leopold in the same moment by suggesting that if she were to borrow a cigar to burn a hole in Leopold's coat, "right here where his heart is", that she could mend it perfectly, insisting to Mr. Nelson that if "[you] are still able to find the spot where the hole was, then I'll give you a kiss and will follow you to Liverpool as your slave. But it won't come to that. Should I say, unfortunately?" (Fontane 33).

Although Marcell, Corinna's cousin and a prospective suitor, confronts her just as bluntly as Felix confronts Esther, Corinna is more direct in declaring her intent to pursue material wealth rather than love. He begins: "I was watching you, I say, and I was genuinely shocked at the excesses of coquetry you tirelessly used to turn that poor boy's, Leopold's, head..." (Fontane 48). While Marcell is repelled by Corinna's bravura and vanity, perhaps more intriguing is his assertion that she has assumed a new identity. Several of his expressions frame Corinna's behavior in theatrical terms, underscoring the notion that this behavior that he finds incongruous with her education and social status is merely an artificial *performance* of an assumed identity. Initially, he casts her behavior in terms of a circus performance, thereby identifying a certain grotesquerie that he believes to be implicit in this transgression: by his estimation, Corinna has "balanced the peacock feathers of her vanity on her chin or on her lips for two whole hours and otherwise achieved the utmost in the finer acrobatic arts" (Fontane 49). As Marcell later reports the evening's events to Corinna's father, he again employs a theatrical metaphor: "she was interested only in Leopold Treibel, to whom she didn't address a single word, or at least not very many, directly, but in whose honor she performed a sort of French play, a little comedy, a dramatic scene" (Fontane 77). Much like Felix, Marcell is unable to resist twice invoking the image of a preening peacock to describe Corinna's behavior, this time as he relates Corinna's plans to marry Leopold for material wealth: "...then she wants to move into the village, and if I've assessed her correctly, she'll also get a peacock to go with the gray cockatoo" (Fontane 78).

Marcell's reproach of Corinna's behavior stems from the same two concerns expressed in *Felix Holt*: he accuses her first of great vanity, but then frames this within a broader accusation of her having assumed an artificial and inappropriate identity. It is to this false identity that he attributes her vanity, her showy intellectual flourishes, and her unabashed interest in material comforts. His criticisms are also weighted with social considerations in his insistence that Corinna's behavior is out of place: "you should sparkle and glitter, as you put it earlier, at the right times, that is, in front of the right people; where it is suitable, where it belongs, where it is worthwhile" (Fontane 52). Nevertheless, Corinna elicits a proposal from the impressionable Leopold and is presented with the option of pursuing a life amongst the *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* of Berlin with her own villa, gold-rimmed tea cups, and cockatoo. Although Corinna began her pursuit with gusto, her eventual disenchantment with this lifestyle, much like Esther's own dissatisfaction with aristocratic preoccupations, begins with her disappointment in her suitor who represents this elevated social sphere.

5. Masculinity, marriage, and moral guidance

As both novels depict heroines who lacked maternal guidance in their formative years and were instead raised by fathers who were greatly preoccupied by their studies, these women are portrayed as lacking sufficient educational and moral guidance. Despite the various material concerns that complicate their decisions to varying degrees, the heroines of both novels ultimately choose a lifestyle that is represented by the suitor who offers them intellectual and moral guidance in addition to strength of character. Although both works question the social construction of the female identity, these heroines fall short of independently creating their own identities. As they waver between contrasting social spheres and prescriptives, the dilemma is ultimately resolved by selecting the suitor who asserts himself as an intellectual and moral guide.

Throughout *Felix Holt*, Esther reveals a desire for self-improvement and expresses an appreciation for pedagogical reproach. Reflecting on her days as a school-girl, she tells Harold: "At our Paris school the master I liked best was an old man who stormed at me terribly when I read Racine, but yet showed that he was proud of me" (Eliot 385). This preference is subtly manifested in her dealings with her suitors.

In two instances, she seems to test each suitor for a pedagogical inclination and arguably make her decision based on this. In chapter ten, as Esther sits at home alone reading a Romantic French novel (*René*), she hears an unmistakable rap on the door. Although she initially moves to hide her book on the window-ledge behind her, she "desisted with a little toss, laid it open on the table beside her, and walked to the outer door" (Eliot 120). Her actions reveal first the knowledge that her chosen reading material would be met with disapproval and subsequently invites that same reprimand by leaving the book open on the table. After Felix upbraids her at length for her literary choices as well as accuses her of "giving [her] soul up to trifles," Esther reflects on this encounter: "She revolted against his assumption of superiority, yet she felt herself in a new kind of subjection to him. He was ill-bred, he was rude, he had taken an unwarrantable liberty; yet his indignant words were a tribute to her: he thought she was worth more pains than the women of whom he took no notice" (Eliot 125). In these reprimands she sees affection and good intentions. She even esteems these pedagogical criticisms above simple adoration: "Her father's desire for her conversion had never moved her; she saw that he adored her all the while, and he never checked

her unregenerate acts as if they degraded her on earth, but only mourned over them as unfitting her for heaven” (Eliot 126). Once Harold assumes the role of a suitor, she puts him to a similar test:

‘A woman ought never to have any trouble. There should always be a man to guard her from it.’ (Harold Transome was masculine and fallible; he had incautiously sat down this morning to pay his addresses by talk about nothing in particular; and, clever experienced man as he was, he fell into nonsense.

‘But suppose the man himself got into trouble – you would wish her to mind about that. Or suppose,’ added Esther, suddenly looking up merrily at Harold, ‘the man himself was troublesome?’

‘O you must not strain probabilities in that way. The generality of men are perfect. Take me, for example.’

‘You are a perfect judge of sauces,’ said Esther, who had her triumphs in letting Harold know that she was capable of taking notes.

‘That is perfection number one. Pray go on.’

‘O, the catalogue is too long – I should be tired before I got to your magnificent ruby ring and your gloves always of the right colour.’

‘If you would let me tell you your perfections, I should not be tired.’

‘That is not complimentary; it means that the list is short.’

‘No; it means that the list is pleasant to dwell upon.’

‘Pray don’t begin,’ said Esther, with her pretty toss of the head; ‘it would be dangerous to our good understanding. The person I liked best in the world was one who did nothing but scold me and tell me of my faults.’ (Eliot 384-385)

She begins by prodding him with teasing that would normally provoke a rebuke from Felix. Harold, however, acknowledges the point and even follows this with flattery. Esther interrupts and instead fondly recalls Felix (“the person I liked best in the world”) who most certainly would have “scolded” her. Clearly it is her preference for a husband who can offer moral guidance that ultimately determines her decision: “And yet, this life at Transome Court was *not* the life of her day-dreams: there was dullness already in its ease, and in the absence of high demand; and there was the vague consciousness that the love of this not un fascinating man who hovered about her gave an air of **moral mediocrity** to all her prospects” (Eliot 407, bold emphasis mine). Here she unites Harold’s dissipate character to the life she imagines awaits her as an heiress at Transome Court, which would be equally unfulfilling. As she and Felix come together at the end of chapter fifty-one, she declares: “I am weak – my husband must be greater and nobler than I am” (Eliot 475).

Conversely, Corinna is initially content to triumph over Leopold with her erudition and wit. Nevertheless, his passivity and lack of character will ultimately cause her to reconsider the engagement. Despite his gentle nature, Leopold is universally derided for his inability to assert himself. Marcell, Prof. Schmidt, Corinna, Leopold’s older brother and his wife, and even his own parents all comment on his submissiveness, deeming him a “milksop” and “a sissy”. After Corinna steers him towards a proposal (or as Jenny declares with indignation, she “engages herself to him” in a “well-considered ambush”), Leopold does quietly tell his mother of his engagement and bears her anger in silence. However, this brief confrontation will be his first and last show of rebelliousness. For a week and a half after the engagement, Leopold does not dare to visit Corinna, but dutifully sends a letter to her every evening by pneumatic post. Paradoxically, these letters are full of promises of eternal devotion and rebellion against the disapproval of his parents. As Corinna tears one of these letters into strips, she wonders “But should I reproach him for not being a hero?

And my fancying I would transform him into a hero is all over too” (Fontane 173-174). She will eventually choose her moralizing cousin Marcell, who is her intellectual equal, if not better, and who shows more character than Leopold.

6. “Trivialities” and realism: Narrative and poetics

In Müller-Seidel’s reflections on Fontane’s society novels, he considers Lukács’s complaint that *Frau Jenny Treibel* lacks a “deeper meaning” and that he places it in the realm of “Belletristik”, which he explains “in the German usage amounts to as much – or as little – as trivial literature, although no one properly knows what that may be”⁸ (Müller-Seidel 316). On the surface Fontane’s novel of an almost farcical marriage plot that is whimsically collapsed virtually as soon as it is concocted may seem like a simple comedy of errors; however the strength of Fontane’s work, as well as Eliot’s *Felix Holt*, is its carefully developed structure and poetics of these society novels. To borrow a more expedient quote from Lukács’s *Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Dramas* of 1909, he observes that “indeed, the Social in literature is: the form”⁹ (Müller-Seidel 13).

Fontane and Eliot both skillfully develop rich narratives with great subtlety of narration and imagery. Beginning with the narrative voice, Fontane’s narrator is discreet without indulging in excessive character judgments despite his omniscience. Certainly there are moments in which the passing thoughts of characters are reported, the most realistic and credible moments of characterization develop from little revealing mannerisms, slight twitches, or revealing imagery. In chapter fourteen of *Frau Jenny Treibel*, Schmolke has managed to go a week and a half without voicing her displeasure to Corinna about her choice of fiancé. As Corinna sits in silence with Schmolke helping to prepare dinner, the quaintness of the domestic setting around them is described poetically:

“...they both stayed in the kitchen with the bright July sun shining in and all the windows open. At one of the windows stood the kitchen table. Outside, on two hooks, hung a boxlike flower shelf, one of those odd creations of the woodcarver’s art that are peculiar to Berlin...In this box were several pots of geraniums and wallflowers through which the sparrows would flit and then, in their big-city boldness, sit on the kitchen table by the window.” (Fontane 174)

He paints an idyllic scene in which their simple home is united with nature as if to remind Corinna of the life that she is forsaking for the frivolous amusements of the Treibel villa. It is in this setting as she works at pounding cinnamon and grating rolls that Schmolke leads Corinna to finally come to terms with her own doubts about her engagement to Leopold. As opposed to the comic artifice of the Treibel villa, this scene of unadorned domestic simplicity will prompt Corinna to again heed her *Herzensbildung* that she had sought to ignore.

Several other moments of revelatory silence arise over the course of the novel in which characters quietly and unconsciously reveal their innermost thoughts in subtly described mannerisms rather than through overt declarations from the narrator. As Kommerzienrat Treibel is questioned by the aristocratic Frau Ziegenhals at their dinner party about his dubious decision to enter politics, he

⁸ “tieferer Sinn”, “...das ist deutschem Sprachgebrauch zufolge fast so viel – oder so wenig – wie Trivialliteratur, obgleich niemand recht weiß was diese eigentlich ist” (Müller-Seidel 316).

⁹ “Das wirklich Soziale aber in der Literatur ist: die Form” (Müller-Seidel 13).

“[runs] his left index finger back and forth along the inner edge of his cravat” as he listens to her extended inquiries. Once she has finished, the narrator reveals that “Treibel, who was usually restless when someone spoke for a long time—an indulgence he allowed only himself—had, however, listened attentively this time, but before replying signaled a servant to offer the lady another glass of chablis” (Fontane 27). The narrator discreetly remains only a few steps ahead of the action in these scenes, allowing Treibel’s nervousness and subsequent irritation to be revealed in his understated behaviors. In this subtle glass of chablis ordered for Treibel’s voluble companion, Fontane’s gentle humor is evident: it is a “pervasive humor which usually shuns satire” (Davis 30). Much of the novel develops through these small details and extensive exchanges of dialogue. By his own assertion, Fontane “stresses that ‘real life...blossoms only from trifles (Kleinkram),’ insisting that “I treat the small with as much love as the great because I don’t quite grant the distinction between small and great” (Davis 65).

Eliot’s narration, although full of substantially more details than Fontane’s novels, contains a great deal of nuance in her imagery. Returning to the notion of a socially constructed identity, this is especially clear in how she invites comparisons between aestheticized representations of a subject, usually painted portraits, with the living subject herself. This device is initially used to reveal the gap between social expectations and reality, first in regards to Harold Transome and later for other female characters. As Mrs. Transome awaits his arrival after a fifteen year separation, she gazes at portraits from his childhood that hang in the sitting-room. In the portrait, she sees “a youthful face which bore a strong resemblance to her own” and she frequently turns to meet the brown eyes. The meeting of her gaze with that of the portrait is sooner mirrored by meeting the gaze of the man himself, now greatly changed after fifteen years: “...she fancied that, in spite of all changes wrought by fifteen years of separation, she should clasp her son again as she had done at their parting; but in the moment when their eyes met, the sense of strangeness came upon her like a terror” (Eliot 16). The scene reveals a moment in which the aestheticized identity created by the painter and Mrs. Transome’s idealized memories collide with the appearance of the man himself. This tendency of the aristocracy to indulge in such idealized mythologies again occurs in chapter forty-two as now Jermyn waits in the drawing-room for Mrs. Transome. He notices a portrait of Mrs. Transome in her youth, in which he sees the image of “that brilliant young woman” who “look[s] smiling down on Mr Jermyn as he passed in front of the fire; and at present hers was the only gaze in the room. He could not help meeting the gaze as he waited, holding his hat behind him – could not help seeing many memories lit up by it” (Eliot 396-397). However, the illusion is soon dispelled: “Before three minutes had passed, however, as if by some sorcery, the brilliant smiling young woman above the mantelpiece seemed to be appearing at the doorway withered and frosted by many winters, and with lips and eyes from which the smile had departed” (Eliot 397). In a similar fashion, Mrs. Transome’s identity stems from conflicting representations and recollections that no longer correspond with the woman herself. This problematic creation of the aristocratic female identity is dissonant with old age. These scenes will anticipate Esther’s own encounter with these paintings and her subsequent refusal to accept this kind of constructed ephemeral identity. As she stands admiring the portrait of one of Harold’s ancestors, he pleads: “‘Don’t move, pray,’ ... ‘you look as if you were standing for your own portrait’” (Eliot 383). His comment alludes not only to Esther’s beauty, which would complement the other tasteful portraits, but also entails her admission into the Transome family if her portrait were to rank among the others. Esther, however, rejects both insinuations and instead comments on the artifice of the representations: “...I notice almost all the portraits are in a conscious, affected attitude.” This

encounter is one of several subtle moments that foreshadow Esther's decision without any direct assertions from the narrator.

7. Conclusion

In this harmony of content and key narrative traits, *Felix Holt* and *Frau Jenny Treibel* demonstrate an instructive interplay between novels that emerge from a similar philosophical and historical moment. Both novels invite further commentary on the heroines' decisions to remain within their original social spheres and continue along the path that otherwise would have been followed had the brief crises never occurred. Although Fontane's and Eliot's heroines momentarily flaunt the confinements of their social and gender roles, they nevertheless stop short of pursuing a life that would radically upset the social order from which they originally emerge. In this light, the texts seem to reveal a great deal of determinism. Davis points to Eliot's writing as inextricably linking public and private action to reveal the limitations of an individual's behavior as they are constrained and thus determined by social demands (Davis 117). A similar reading could be applied to Fontane's Berlin society, in which his heroines will ultimately view their attempts to transgress social divides as irrational fantasies and dutifully return to their original spheres (Fontane's Berlin society novels are particularly amenable to such an interpretation, considering that a similar course is also undertaken by Lene in *Irrungen, Wirungen* and the eponymous heroine of *Stine*). Perhaps these resolutions are the triumph of *Herzensbildung* over the "accursed *Bildung*," to again invoke Fontane's distinction, however this reading does not account for the near-bathos of an ending that initially appears to return the narrative to the opening status quo.

Without wholly dismissing this interpretation, one could nevertheless argue that this passivity displayed by the heroines is instead a function of Walter Scott's influence on both Eliot and Fontane. *Felix Holt* and *Frau Jenny Treibel* contain traits of a historical novel, namely in their depiction of a passive heroine caught on the border between two contrasting worlds which they bring into dialogue, if briefly. In Georg Lukács's analysis of Scott's heroes, he reflects on the Scottian hero who will "find a 'middle way' for himself between the warring extremes" (Lukács 32). This stance is certainly applicable to Esther and Corinna, although they are reconceptualized by their authors who endow them with above-average traits, diverging slightly from Scott's preference for "mediocre" or "average" heroes. Even so, this decision to construct a novel around a passive hero is in keeping with a partial "renunciation of Romanticism, a conquest of Romanticism, a higher development of the realist literary traditions of the Enlightenment" (Lukács 33). Although Lukács speaks of the hero's role in an *epic*, it is perhaps only the weight of the historical moment and the strength of the social forces at play that are needed to establish the basis for a narrative in which "the individual is, so to speak, subject to the event" (Lukács 35). Much like Scott's heroes, Fontane's and Eliot's heroines briefly emerge from the periphery to unite the two social extremes only to recede again by the end and bear witness to the resulting developments of the encounter. With this reading, the ending of *Felix Holt* and *Frau Jenny Treibel* is not a return to the status quo, but instead the beginning of a greater dialogue between the contrasting social spheres which will continue in other works. In light of these shared literary, philosophical, and historical influences, a comparative reading of selected works by George Eliot and Theodor Fontane reveals how their novels both attest to a particular historical moment without necessarily directly responding to one another.

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