
Kitten, Peacock, Butterfly, Peach

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In her book *Adam Bede*, George Eliot compares many characters to animals, but none receives so consistent and repeated comparisons as Hetty. While a townspeople is said to have a “slow bovine gaze” (ch. 2), Hetty is called “kitten,” (ch. 7) “peacock,” (16) and “butterfly.” (12) Eliot’s figurative language emphasizes Hetty’s beauty, cuddliness, and vanity.

A kitten is soft, cute, and sensual, but grows into a cat, which is all of those things but also evasive and sharp-clawed. Eliot’s comparisons of Hetty to a kitten give rise to a suspicion that is later confirmed: that Hetty, however pretty to look at, is not actually a loving person, just as a kitten does not feel human love. The word “kitten” is used seven times in the book, and *every single time* it describes Hetty. It is used in the phrases “a beauty like that of kittens” “kittenlike maiden,” (ch. 7) and similarly (ch. 15, 19, 23, 34, 36) until Book V. “Kitten” is used in the first chapter of Book V, but never again in the novel. From the reader’s current progress in the book, this fact is interesting: what happens in Book V? Do we discover that Hetty is not so cuddly after all? We must wait and see.

A butterfly is beautiful, but it is an insect, a creature without any centralized nervous

system, so a comparison to a butterfly is a mixed message. The word “butterfly” is also used solely to describe Hetty or her actions. The first time narrates what might have happen if Donnithorne and Hetty had met as children: “they would have stood face to face, eyeing each other with timid liking, then given each other a little butterfly kiss, and toddled off to play together.” (ch. 12) A butterfly kiss, of course, is the tickling of another’s cheeks with one’s eyelashes—one’s long, darkly beautiful eyelashes, in the case of Hetty (ch. 15). Eliot’s point here is that, had *circumstances* (Donnithorne’s favorite word) been more favorable, the kiss between Hetty and Arthur would have been insignificant. Hetty is insectified twice more in the novel. The passage “Her little butterfly soul fluttered incessantly between memory and dubious expectation” (ch. 13) emphasizes the triviality of Hetty’s spirituality (which is confirmed when we see her “peculiar form of worship” (ch. 15)). Finally, Eliot writes about Hetty’s “fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations” (ch. 22), showing that her emotions are none too deep either.

Hetty’s uncaring vanity is pointed out when her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, compares her to a peacock. She says, “She’s no better than a peacock, as ’ud strut about on the wall and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks i’ the parish was dying: there’s nothing seems to give her a turn i’ th’ inside, not even when we thought Totty had tumbled into the pit.” (ch. 15) Indeed, when she hears of Thias’s death, she says “Oh, how dreadful!”, “looking serious, but not deeply affected.” (ch. 8)

And finally we come to the ultimate accusation of brainlessness: a comparison to a plant. Hetty is likened to a peach, with her utter lack of deep emotions as the stone, and it is foreshadowed that Donnithorne will not be the happier for this seed, of which he is not

aware: “people who love downy peaches are apt not to think of the stone, and sometimes jar their teeth terribly against it” (ch. 15).

Because it is not very subtle, Eliot’s use of animals (and sometimes plants!) seems strange to modern readers, but it truly characterizes Hetty. A kitten, a peacock, a butterfly, and a peach, Hetty **is** pretty to look at, and perhaps sweet to taste, but will Arthur and Adam look for more in their potential mates? Perhaps she is like a peach in another way, spilling her sweet stickiness on the fingers of others, so that they become as silly and blind as her.