CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND DRAMATIC MODE OF PRESENTATION OF "EDWARD EDWARD" AND "SISTER HELEN"

This chapter is a detailed and minute comparative and contrastive study of the narrative structure and the dramatic mode of presentation of the traditional medieval ballad "Edward Edward" and "Sister Helen". It aims to demonstrate the complexity and sophistication of Rossetti's literary ballad over that of its medieval original with regard to these two aspects.

"Sister Helen" was written in 1854 and published in April 1870. In the 1881 publication of his Poems, Rossetti included "Sister Helen" after modifying it by including Keith of Ewern's recently wedded wife as one of the pleaders. Critics universally consider the 1870 version to be the standard one, and it is this version which is more widely anthologized than the latter. However, for the sake of reference, the 1881 version has been included in the appendix.

"Sister Helen" has been chosen for intensive analysis because of the seven literary ballads which Rossetti wrote it is one ballad which he conceived of as a direct imitation of a particular traditional ballad namely "Edward Edward," which by itself in the words of F.J. Child the chief authority on traditional medieval balladry is "one of the noblest and most
sterling specimens of the popular ballad" (qtd. in Hodgart 103). This is supported by the assertions of the following critics:

(i) The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English annotates "Sister Helen" as "an imitation medieval ballad ... first published in 1870 [and] essentially in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition of the ballad revival" (856 and 922).

(ii) David Daiches also calls it an "imitation ballad" (1021).

(iii) Jerome H. Buckley remarks on "the accuracy of ['Sister Helen's'] medievalism, archaic diction and the devices of balladry" (135).

(iv) H.J.C. Grierson and J.C. Smith assert that "Sister Helen" is a masterpiece in its artificial kind ... [and] the form is modelled on the ballad of 'Edward Edward' ... the story not being told directly but inferred in mounting horror from the dialogue between brother and sister" (443-444).

(v) And more specifically Anne Henry Ehrenpreis remarks that "Sister Helen's' stanza form is modelled on 'Edward Edward's'" (11).

The ballad belongs to that branch of literature called narrative poetry which is concerned with "the oldest preoccupation of literature i.e. story telling" (Anne Henry Ehrenpreis 10). As Grigson remarks the ballad is "a short story in verse" (6). To state the obvious the story element is the most vital component of all ballads, as David Buchan rightly points out "the story's the thing" (56). So quite appropriately my analysis begins by examining the stories of both the ballads.

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For the sake of quick and ready reference both the poems; "Edward Edward" and "Sister Helen" have been printed in the text of the dissertation itself:

Edward, Edward

I

'Why does your brand sae drop wi'blude,
Edward, Edward?

Why does your brand sae drop wi'blude,
And why sae sad gang ye, O?'—

'O I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,
Mither, mither;

O I hae kill'd my hawk sae gude,
And I had nae mair but he, O'.

II

'Your hawk's blude was never sae red,
Edward, Edward;

Your hawk's blude was never sae red,
My dear son, I tell thee, O'—

21
‘O I hae kill’d my red-roan steed,
    Mither, mither;

O I hae kill’d my red-roan steed,
    That erst was sae fair and free, O’;

III

‘Your steed was auld, and ye hae got mair,
    Edward, Edward;

Your steed was auld, and ye hae got mair;
    Some other dule ye dree, O’—

‘O I hae kill’d my father dear,
    Mither, mither;

O I hae kill’d my father dear,
    Alas, and wae is me, O!’

IV

‘And whatten penance will ye dree for that,
    Edward, Edward?

Whatten penance will ye dree for that?
    My dear son, now tell me, O’—
'I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
    Mither, mither;

I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
    And I'll fare over the sea, O'.

V

'And what will ye do wi' your tow'rs and your ha',
    Edward, Edward?

And what will ye do wi' your tow'rs and your ha',
    That were sae fair to see, O'?—

'I'll let them stand till they doun fa',
    Mither, mither;

I'll let them stand till they doun fa',
    For here never mair maun I be, O'.

VI

'And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
    Edward, Edward?

And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
    When ye gang owre the sea, O'?—
The world's room: let them beg through life,
    Mither, mither;

The world's room: let them beg through life;
    For them never mair will I see, O'.

VII

And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
    Edward, Edward?

And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
    My dear son, now tell me, O?'—

'The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear,
    Mither, mither;

The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear:
    Sic counsels ye gave to me, O!'

    Couch (290-292)

SISTER HELEN

"Why did you melt your waxen man,
    Sister Helen?
To-day is the third since you began."
"The time was long, yet the time ran,
    Little brother."

24
(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Three days to-day, between Hell and Heaven!)

"But if you have done your work aright,
Sister Helen,
You'll let me play, for you said I might."
"Be very still in your play to-night,
Little brother."

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Third night, to-night, between Hell and Heaven!)

"You said it must melt ere vesper bell,
Sister Helen;
If now it be molten, all is well."
"Even so,—nay, peace! you cannot, tell,
Little brother."

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
O What is this, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh the waxen knave was plump to-day,
Sister Helen;
How like dead folk he has dropped away!"
"Nay now, of the dead what can you say,
Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What of the dead, between Hell and Heaven!)

"See, see, the sunken pile of wood,
Sister Helen,
Shines through the thinned wax red as blood!"
"Nay now, when looked you yet on blood,
Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
How pale she is, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore,
Sister Helen,
And I'll play without the gallery door."
"Aye, let me rest, —I'll lie on the floor,
Little brother,

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What rest to-night, between Hell and Heaven!)
"Here high up in the balcony,

Sister Helen,
The moon flies face to face with me."
"Aye, look and say whatever you see,

Little brother."

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What sight to-night, between Hell and Heaven!?)

"Outside it's merry in the wind's wake,

Sister Helen;
In the shaken trees the chill stars shake."
"Hush, heard you a horse-tread as you spake,

Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What sound to-night, between Hell and Heaven!)

"I hear a horse-tread, and I see,

Sister Helen,
Three horsemen that ride terribly."
"Little brother, whence come the three

Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Whence should they come, between Hell and Heaven!?)

27
"They come by the hill-verge from Boyne Bar,
   Sister Helen,
And one draws nigh, but two are afar."
"Look, look, do you know them who they are,
   Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Who should they be, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh, it's Keith of Eastholm rides so fast,
   Sister Helen,
For I know the white mane on the blast."
"The hour has come, has come at last,
   Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Her hour at last, between Hell and Heaven!)

"He has made a sign and called Halloo!
   Sister Helen,
And he says that he would speak with you."
"Oh tell him I fear the frozen dew,
   Little brother."

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Why laughs she thus, between Hell and Heaven)
"The wind is loud, but I hear him cry, 
Sister Helen, 
That Keith of Ewern's like to die."
"And he and thou, and thou and I, 
Little brother, 
(O Mother, Mary Mother, 
And they and we, between Hell and Heaven!) 

"For three days now he has lain abed, 
Sister Helen, 
And he prays in torment to be dead." 
"The thing may chance, if he have prayed, 
Little brother!" 

(O Mother, Mary Mother!) 
If he have prayed, between Hell and Heaven!) 

"But he has not ceased to cry to-day, 
Sister Helen, 
That you should take your curse away." 
"My prayer was heard,—he need but pray, 
Little brother!" 

(O Mother, Mary Mother, 
Shall God not hear, between Hell and Heaven!)
"But he says, till you take back your ban,
   Sister Helen,
His soul would pass, yet never can."
"Nay then, shall I slay a living man,
   Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
A living soul, between Hell and Heaven!)

"But he calls for ever on your name,
   Sister Helen,
And says that he melts before a flame."
"My heart for his pleasure fared the same,
   Little brother."

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Fire at the heart, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Here's Keith of Westholm riding fast,
   Sister Helen,
For I know the white plume on the blast."
"The hour, the sweet hour I forecast,
   Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Is the hour sweet, between Hell and Heaven!)

30
"He stops to speak, and he stills his horse,
    Sister Helen;
But his words are drowned in the wind's course."
"Nay hear, nay hear, you must hear perforce,
    Little brother!"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{A word ill heard, between Hell and Heaven!})

"Oh he says that Keith of Ewern's cry,
    Sister Helen,
Is ever to see you ere he die."
"He sees me in earth, in moon and sky,
    Little brother!"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{Earth, moon and sky, between Hell and Heaven!})

"He sends a ring and a broken coin,
    Sister Helen,
And bids you mind the banks of Boyne".
"What else he broke will he ever join,
    Little brother?"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{Oh, never more, between Hell and Heaven!})
"He yields you these and craves full fain,
Sister Helen,
You pardon him in his mortal pain."
"What else he took will he give again,
Little brother?"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{No more, no more, between Hell and Heaven!})

"He calls your name in an agony,
Sister Helen,
That even dead Love must weep to see."
"Hate, born of Love, is blind as he,
Little brother!"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{Love turned to hate, between Hell and Heaven!})

"Oh it's Keith of Keith now that rides fast,
Sister Helen,
For I know the white hair on the blast."
"The short short hour will soon be past,
Little brother!"

(\textit{O Mother, Mary Mother,}
\textit{Will soon be past, between Hell and Heaven!})

32
"He looks at me and he tries to speak,
    Sister Helen,
But oh! his voice is sad and weak!"
"What here should the mighty Baron seek,
    Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Is this the end, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh his son still cries, if you forgive,
    Sister Helen,
The body dies but the soul that live."
Fire shall forgive me as I forgive,
    Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
As she forgives, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh he prays you, as his heart would rive,
    Sister Helen,
To save his dear son’s soul alive."
"Fire cannot slay it, it shall thrive,
    Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Alas, alas, between Hell and Heaven!)
"He cries to you, kneeling in the road,
Sister Helen,
To go with him for the love of God!"
"The way is long to his son's abode,
Little brother".

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
The way is long, between Hell and Heaven!)

"O Sister Helen, you heard the bell,
Sister Helen,
More loud than the vesper-chime it fell."
"No vesper-chime, but a dying knell,
Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
His dying knell, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Alas! but I fear the heavy sound,
Sister Helen;
Is it in the sky or in the ground?"
"Say, have they turned their horses round,
Little brother?"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What would she more, between Hell and Heaven!)
"They have raised the old man from his knee,        
         Sister Helen,  
And they ride in silence hastily."        
"More fast the naked soul doth flee,        
         Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
The naked soul, between Hell and Heaven!)        

"Oh the wind is sad in the iron chill,        
         Sister Helen,  
And weary sad they look by the hill."        
"But he and I are sadder still,        
         Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Most sad of all, between Hell and Heaven!)        

"See, see, the wax has dropped from its place,        
         Sister Helen,  
And the flames are winning up apace!"        
"Yet here they burn but for a space,        
         Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Here for a space, between Hell and Heaven!)
"Ah! what white thing at the door has cross’d,
Sister Helen?
Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?"
"A soul that’s lost as mine is lost,
Little brother!"

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)

Rossetti (76-83)

In the medieval ballad "Edward Edward," the eponymous hero has murdered his father at his mother’s instigation. The murder is revealed to us indirectly during Edward’s conversation with his mother. His mother wants to know why his sword is dripping with blood. After two unconvincing and evasive replies that he has killed his hawk and his horse, and her refusal to believe them he confesses to the patricide. After assuring his mother that he will go into self-exile to atone for his crime, he remarks that he is indifferent to the fate of his "tow’rs and ha’." In the nuncupative testament that follows he states that he is indifferent to the plight of his wife and children for whom he bequeathes nothing. His mother’s complicity in the murder is revealed to us very dramatically, when she finally asks him what he is going to bequeath to her. Edward condemns her without the slightest hesitation, by replying:
"The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear,
Mither, mither;
The curse of hell frae me sall ye bear:
Sic counsels ye gave to me, O!"

In Rossetti’s imitation of this ballad, "Sister Helen," the eponymous heroine has been loved and cast aside wantonly by a nobleman Keith of Ewern. Helen’s love for him has now turned to hate. She avenges her loss of honour by resorting to witchcraft. She makes a waxen image of him and melts it down slowly resulting in his long drawn out and agonising death. She ensures that his soul goes to hell by denying him any opportunity for him to repent: "Oh his son still cries, if you forgive, / Sister Helen, / The body dies but the soul shall live" and that too inspite of the impassioned pleas of the victim’s two brothers Keith of Eastholm, and Keith of Westholm, and his father Keith of Keith.

"Edward Edward" is a grim and macabre story of brutal violence: Edward is presented to us as just then having murdered his father, and with his sword dripping with his father’s blood confronting his mother who had urged him to commit the murder.

"Sister Helen" is also a story of cold blooded murder, but unlike its original, additional elements of the eerie supernatural, exhilarating romance, spurned love and vicious hatred and the consequent ruthless revenge have all been blended together into a harmonious whole. Almost all ballads have as their themes the supernatural or romance or love or hate and

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revenge, but hardly any one ballad would contain all these ideas at the same time. Rossetti's creative achievement lies in amalgamating these disparate elements into a complex but elegant unity. Moreover the crucial part of the story, the means by which Helen avenges herself does not belong to balladry at all but has been borrowed from medieval folklore: "Sister Helen's' waxen image-burning is a familiar practice of witches but has no equivalent in the traditional ballads" (Anne Henry Ehrenpreis 14). Thus Rossetti's ballad story is more sophisticated than "Edward Edward's" because it is a synthesis of various story themes found in different ballads along with an idea totally alien to traditional balladry.

Consequently "Sister Helen" is almost five times longer than "Edward Edward", more complex and elaborate and also more complete. The reason why Helen seeks vengeance, and how she achieves it is clearly explained in the poem. "Hate, born of Love" motivates Helen to kill Keith of Ewern in a slow and agonising manner by using witchcraft, without even giving him a chance to repent and save his soul inspite of the insistent pleas of his kinsmen and father.

However, in "Edward Edward" the reason why the mother wanted her husband to be killed by her own son is never revealed. How she persuaded him to commit the murder, why he agreed to do it, and then after doing it why he tried to hide it from her are never revealed to us. This was because as Hunt remarks the medieval ballad unlike Rossetti's was not merely short but characterised by "supreme concentration" (50).
Both the ballads begin in 'mediares'. "Edward Edward" begins straightaway with the mother asking Edward why his sword drips with blood and why he is so sad:

'Why does your brand sae drop wi'blude
Edward, Edward?
Why does your brand sae drop wi'blude,
And why sae sad gang ye, O?'—

Edward's reply and the mother's persistent interrogation that follows, reveals to us the gruesome details of the murder that has just taken place. We are plunged into the midst of the action without any introduction whatsoever. The obvious merit of this method is that it electrifies us into an immediate state of alertness by captivating our attention.

The same technique is employed by Rossetti to begin "Sister Helen". The poem begins with the conversation between Helen and her little brother: "Why did you melt your waxen man, / Sister Helen? / Today is the third since you began." The brother wishes to know why his sister has been melting the waxen figure for three days and in the course of the conversation that follows the story gradually unfolds itself. Just as in "Edward Edward," we are plunged directly into the heart of the action without any introduction whatsoever with the same nerve tingling effect.
However there is an important and very subtle difference between the opening lines of the two poems. "Edward Edward" begins with the simple present "Why does"; whereas "Sister Helen" begins with the simple past "Why did" and leaps into the simple present in the third line: "To-day is the third..." only to immediately revert to the simple past: "...since you began." / "The time was long, yet the time ran..." The waxen figure is being melted for the past three days, however the story proper begins chronologically only on the third day. Thus although the simple past and the simple present have been used the fact is the very act of burning the wax figure is still going on. The notion conveyed is actually present progressive. This abrupt tense shift, and the use of one tense to connote another and different notion of time makes the opening of "Sister Helen" more intricate and profound than the opening of "Edward Edward." Most important this is anticipatory of what is to occur in the story, when the past, present and future of Helen and Keith of Ewern are unfolded swiftly with lightning shifts in tense. Thus Rossetti has made the opening of his poem more complex and subtle than the original medieval ballad "Edward Edward."

Both the ballad stories are narrated with such great dramatic power that we are able to vividly visualise all the incidents. We have the feeling that all the incidents are being played out right in front of our very eyes. The bare essential elements of drama are: place, time, characters and dialogue. In "Edward Edward" we have the barest of the bare minimum
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— only two characters and their dialogue. Time and place have been completely omitted. There is no indication whatsoever as to when and where Edward and his mother are conversing. Too much is left to the imagination of the readers, and the dramatic intensity is only implicit. The bareness has the negative effect of teasing our imagination and then leaving it unfulfilled.

In "Sister Helen," on the contrary, all the basic elements of drama - time, place, people and dialogue - are present. Consequently the drama is more sharply defined than in the original medieval ballad "Edward Edward." Time and the duration of the action is indicated thus: "To-day is the third since you began. / The time was long, yet the time ran"; "to-night"; "ere vesper-bell"; "if now it be molten"; "to-day"; "the hour, the sweet hour"; "ere he die"; "The short hour will soon be past"; "the vesper-chime"; "Yet here they burn but for a space." The place of action is likewise specified: "without the gallery door"; "Here high up in the balcony"; "Outside"; "the hill- verge from Boyne Bar"; "the banks of Boyne"; "here"; "in the road"; "son's abode"; "by the hill"; "in the sky or in the ground"; "at the door"; "in the frost" and last but not the least "between Hell and Heaven." And in a strikingly powerful ironical line, "Yet here they burn but for a space, / Little brother!" the notion of both time and place are specified in the same line itself.

In addition to the mundane task of merely specifying time and place some of these indicators have metaphorical connotations and thereby
they infuse the poem with a richness of meaning which is missing in "Edward Edward". The vesper-bell calls the worshippers for the last religious service held in the evening. In the poem it signifies the following:

(i) The end of the day and the beginning of the night.

(ii) Helen's successful completion of the melting of the wax figure and the gaining of her revenge and the beginning of her punishment both here and in hell.

(iii) The end of the little boy's restless waiting and the beginning of his play time. In the 29th stanza:

"O Sister Helen, you heard the bell,

    Sister Helen!

More loud than the vesper-chime it fell;

"No vesper-chime, but a dying knell, Little Brother!"

  (O Mother, Mary Mother,

  His dying knell, between Hell and Heaven!)

the little brother in his impatience to start playing mistakes the sound of Keith of Ewern's death knell for the "vesper-chime," and when Helen corrects him promptly, the symbolism becomes apparent: just like how the vesper-bell signifies the end of the day and the beginning of the night, the death knell signifies the end of Keith of Ewern's life here on earth and the beginning of his life in hell. The symbolism is further enriched by the ambiguity of the phrase, "dying knell", in which "dying" could be
both a gerund and a participle. It could thus mean a knell, the sound of which is gradually diminishing or it could mean the knell which signifies death.

Similarly the phrases, "the hour, the sweet hour"; "the short short hour"; "but for a space"; which refer to the actual moment of the consummation of Helen's revenge are all tinged with irony. It is paradoxical that the "sweet" moment of her success should mark the beginning of her own suffering in hell, for soon she will be burnt alive at the stake for practising sorcery. The actual moment of the revenge is very brief, but the torment in hell is eternal.

Through Keith of Westholm's communication we understand that Keith of Ewern is desperate to see Helen just once before he dies. To which she replies sarcastically: "He sees me in earth, in moon and sky." Earth, moon and sky refer to the elements of the universe, and Keith of Ewern when he was passionately in love with her would have pronounced in hyperbolic praise the same words -"I see you in earth, moon and sky"- which Helen is now literally throwing back at him. It is crushingly paradoxical that Keith of Ewern who was formerly able to see her "in earth, in moon and sky" is now unable to have even a glimpse of her.

"Hell and Heaven" represent the two extreme poles between which the destinies of Helen and Keith of Ewern oscillate. The tension in the poem is a result of the moral dilemma whether Keith of Ewern
will be allowed to repent and ensure his soul’s passage to heaven, or whether he will not be allowed to repent and thus end up in hell—the place where the flames burn eternally. Similarly "the banks of [the river] Boyne" represents the joyous past of their courtship. And Helen makes a grimly ironical reference to hell when she says "The way is long to his son’s abode, / Little brother."

The bareness of "Edward Edward", in which time and locale have not been mentioned, is made keener by the total lack of even a hint of atmosphere. On the contrary, "Sister Helen" is richly charged with a pervasive atmosphere. It is a clear and picturesque moonlit night: "The moon flies face to face with me," and the stars are out: "In the shaken trees the chill stars shake"; but however it is very cold and windy: "Oh tell him I fear the frozen dew"; "The wind is loud, but I hear him cry."

The physical atmosphere apart what is more notable is the psychological atmosphere which permeates the poem. It is overall gloomy and macabre inspite of the presence of the trustworthy ‘little brother’ who is impatient to go out and play, for even a playful little fellow like him speaks of death and blood: "How like dead folk he has dropped away!" and "the thinned wax red as blood!" At its finest it is analogous to the tormented state of Helen’s psyche: "The most successful means he uses of demonstrating the anguish of [Helen’s mind] is to use the setting to reflect a suitable atmosphere for the state of mind and, by extension to seem to be that state of mind" (Hunt 48-9). The phrase "iron chill"
used to describe the wind blowing outside, could also be applied to Helen's steely and ruthless resolve deep within her mind to torture and kill her unfaithful lover. And the lines "Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost? / "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!" epitomise her desperation and despondency for she had known all along that her victory would only be a pyrrhic one.

The line "Outside it's merry in the wind's wake" emphasises the contrast between the atmosphere inside Helen's room, and outside it. Inside the room where the act of sorcery is being performed, it is very grim and gloomy. There is a feeling of impending doom, as the weary but wakeful Helen waits anxiously for news about Keith of Ewern. The only comfort inside would have been the fire which would have kept them warm.

"Outside" however "its merry." It's almost a romantic night, with the moon and the stars out. The boy is only too happy to get away from the stifling atmosphere inside and play in the balcony. However, immediately the pleaders arrive and the cheerful mood is replaced by one of hostility, which is typified by the cold windy blast outside.

And to crown it all Rossetti has used the atmosphere of the poem most effectively as a backdrop by altering and adapting it appropriately to the changing events in the story. Before the three pleaders arrive on the scene the little brother says "Outside it's merry in the wind's wake",
but towards the end of the poem as they return disappointed he says: "O the wind is sad in the iron chill". Thus Rossetti's "Sister Helen" is richer than its medieval original "Edward Edward" because of the presence of 'atmosphere,' which has been used not only as a backdrop to the action, but more importantly for its symbolic connotations.

In "Edward Edward" the characters in the drama are only two in number: Edward and his mother. In "Sister Helen" however there are five characters: Helen and her brother, and the three pleaners - Keith of Eastholm and Keith of Westholm the brothers of Keith of Ewern, and Keith of Keith their aged father. Consequently the drama in "Sister Helen" is more powerful and complex.

Edward has not been characterised comprehensively. There is not even a hint of a physical characteristic. From the few details available we are able to infer that he is a nobleman who has his own "tow'rs and ha'" and one who indulges in aristocratic sports - he has a "hawk" and a "red-roan steed." He is married and has children. He is depicted as being impressionable enough to be persuaded by his mother to murder his father, and as being unable to withstand the persistent questioning of his mother, consequently he confesses to the murder. He now regrets his action and feels remorseful: "Alas, and wae is me, O!" To atone for his crime and guilt he decides to spend the rest of his life in self-imposed exile, abandoning meanwhile his material possessions and family to their respective unhappy fates: "I'll let them stand till they down fa" and "The
world's room: let them beg through life." Although he hates his mother enough to curse her to hell he allows her to escape scot free. To sum up, Edward presents the pathetic picture of a pliant and cowardly person submissive to his mother, who now faces the prospect of a desolate future.

Edward's mother is portrayed as a wicked and remorseless woman, evil enough to use her son to commit the horrible deed. Her monchalant behaviour throughout the poem shocks us violently: she does not express any sorrow towards the death of her husband, or the least bit of love and affection towards her son. She's obviously a domineering woman, who is at the same time intelligent enough to see through Edward's evasive replies. Towards the end we see her revealed as a greedy woman optimistic of being bequeathed richly by Edward, but on the contrary only to be castigated severely by him.

Edward's father, the victim, is a very shadowy character. He does not appear in the poem, and nothing is known about him. When the poem begins he has already been killed by his son. We don't know why he became a prey to the machinations of his wife, and whether he deserved such a fate or not.

Evelyn Waugh in his biography of Rossetti points out that "woman, in the abstract, was always an absorbing mystery to him [Rossetti]" (53). Later on he elaborates by saying that "... the spirit of woman was his one persistent preoccupation, and at least half of his work, both in
poetry and painting, is an endeavour to express it forcibly and permanently. The mystery and attraction of womanhood and the physical beauty of women were to him quintessential elements of life, and he felt nothing unworthy in his devotion of his art of their exaltation" (225). This fascination for women, their physical beauty and their psyche, has been traced by Gelpi to the days of his childhood and youth: "Rossetti lived in youth within a feminine circle whose circumference was his mother, his aunts, his elder sister Mana and his younger sister Christina" (96). She also claims that his mother exercised a very strong influence over him, and that he was very much attached to her, and remained devoted to her throughout his life. Both his sisters never married and Mana the elder became a nun. Christina, the younger, was never fortunate enough to meet the right man. Rossetti once described her as "seated by the grave of buried hope" (qtd. in Hunt 106). One exquisite result of this fascination for women, is Helen of "Sister Helen".

Rossetti does not give us an explicit physical description of Helen, but references to her physical appearance and condition are not lacking: "How pale she is"; "Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore"; "Why laughs she thus?" And although no background information is given about her status or family, these references constitute an important aspect of Helen's personality and help to humanise her.

Helen is presented as a mysterious person performing an act of sorcery, and the reason why she's doing this is revealed only midway
through the poem. No question from her brother or the three pleaders yields a direct and straight answer from her. Her equivocations serve to intensify the mystery surrounding her; and to crown it all, she never reveals herself to the pleaders, and even to us she is presented as a person so engrossed in her business of witchcraft for the past three days, that by the time the three pleaders arrive she is completely exhausted, and lies down on the floor with her eyes closed, totally oblivious to her physical surroundings.

An element of romance is mingled with the mystery surrounding her. She must have been young and attractive enough for the nobleman Keith of Ewern to fall in love with her. Helen confesses that she once loved him passionately:

"But he calls forever on your name,
Sister Helen,
And says that he melts before a flame;
'My heart for his pleasure fared the same,
Little brother'.

She is also reminded of their romantic tryst on the banks of the river Boyne, when they exchanged love tokens and pledged to be loyal to one another: "He sends a ring and a broken coin, / Sister Helen, / And bids you mind the banks of Boyne."
The mystery and the romance are highlighted by her present forlorn state. She has been used by her lover and cast aside, and is now in hiding in her retreat. She refuses to have any contact with nature -"outside it's merry"- and human society. She is completely hidden from the three pleaders. An obviously intellectual and physical gap separates her from her little brother: he is "high up in the balcony," while she is "on the floor."

Helen is a very determined person who is relentless in her pursuit of vengeance. She refuses to even see the three pleaders, leave alone talk with them. Even when her little brother reports that: "He [Keith of Keith] cries to you, kneeling in the road, / Sister Helen, / To go with him for the love of God!" she remains implacable as ever. Her determination and relentlessness stem from the fact that she is confident of her witchcraft abilities, and is certain that she will succeed in avenging her betrayer although initially she had some reservations: "Even so, —nay, peace! you cannot tell, / Little Brother." Her self confidence, resoluteness, and remorselessness set her apart from Edward who is indecisive and regrets having murdered his father.

Unlike Edward who is a man and can handle a sword Helen, belonging to the weaker sex, resorts to witchcraft and plans her murder in secrecy and with great caution. Her skill and patience help her to succeed in torturing her victim to death, unlike Edward who kills his father outright. Edward is not intelligent enough to evade his mother's
persistent questioning and confesses to the murder easily whereas Helen's subtle equivocations testify to her shrewd and cunning nature. When the aged father pleads with her to come to his son's home, she replies: "The way is long to his son's abode, / Little brother." Here "abode" refers to hell.

Except for the two terse statements "Some other dule ye dree, O—" and "Alas, and wae is me, O!" we do not get any glimpse into Edward's mind. On the contrary Rossetti "... presents [a] convincing psychological exploration of the tormented mind of his heroine, Sister Helen" (Hunt 48). This is the result of Rossetti's unique ability as Gelpi affirms to "...move at times into virtual identification with the women he watches" (97). Helen's mind unlike Edward's is revealed as a seething cauldron of overwrought emotions. On the one hand she feels rage and shame at having been abused and cast aside, on the other she feels powerless against men who are richer and more powerful, and most important she is chillingly aware of the dangers and consequences, both in this world and in the next, of using witchcraft to avenge her disgrace. The following lines express the anguish of her mind:

"The hour has come, has come at last"

"And he and thou, and thou and I

[are like to die.]"

"My prayer was heard, — he need but pray."
"My heart for his pleasure fared the same."

"The hour, the sweet hour I forecast."

"What else he broke will he ever join."

"What else he took will he give again."

"Hate, born of Love, is blind as he."

"The short short hour will soon be past."

"Fire shall forgive me as I forgive."

"Yet here they burn but for a space."

"A soul that's lost as mine is lost."

"[The] haunted and self conscious figure is at the heart of all Rossetti's poems and paintings" (Jerome J. Mc Gann 85). This is particularly true of "Sister Helen." Whereas Edward is completely unmindful of the consequences of his deed and heedless of what happens to him and his family and his possessions, Helen as her own statements above reveal is intensely obsessed with herself and her own feelings.

Except for the line "But Keith of Ewern's sadder still," which is actually more an expression of malevolence than of sympathy, she does not spare a single thought or even an iota of a feeling towards anyone else in the poem. This has prompted Joan Rees to remark, "Rossetti's
work has contrived to imagine the experience of being distanced altogether from experience. It is to have fashioned a vehicle for conveying, quite literally, the feeling of the absence of feeling. Nowhere is this experience more clearly visible than in all the literary ballads ("Troy Town," "Stratton Water," "Sister Helen," and so forth) [emphasis added] (83).

This does not mean that Helen is an inhuman person. Although she resorts to witchcraft to avenge her betrayal and shame she is certainly not a witch. Rossetti does not fail to depict her as a person with body and soul: "Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore, / Sister Helen," and "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!" In the 1881 version Rossetti changed the line "But Keith of Ewern's sadder still, / Little brother!" into "But he and I are sadder still, / Little brother!" causing Hunt to observe "that Helen is less of a witch and more human [now]" (50).

And herein lies her tragedy. Unlike Edward who is only a tool in the hands of his evil mother, Helen resembles a greek tragic hero in many respects. "[Rossetti's] poetry is about fate - or, more accurately, about how fates get constructed out of the actual conditions of the life we know" (Joan Rees 67). The story of a woman being abused and betrayed by her lover is a familiar occurrence in daily life and in literature; but Rossetti has enriched such an ordinary theme by assigning fate, as in the ancient greek tragic plays, a very significant role in "Sister Helen".
The following lines underscore, how fate governs the lives of Helen, her brother, and Keith of Ewern:

"The time was long, yet the time ran / 
   Little brother!"

"The hour has come, has come at last, / 
   Little brother!"

"That Keith of Ewern's like to die; 

"And he and thou, and thou and I, / 
   Little brother; 

"The hour, the sweet hour I forecast, / 
   Little brother!"

Fate thus casts its shadow of impending doom unmistakably over the lives of these three characters.

Helen's hubris is evident when she arrogantly refuses to see the three pleaders. Her pride is amply rewarded when she brings "the mighty Baron," the aged Keith of Keith her lover's father to his knees: "He cries to you, kneeling in the road, / Sister Helen." And it is her proud moment of victory when she retorts grimly that his son's fate is sealed both in this world and in the next: "Fire cannot slay it, it shall thrive." She is obviously vain that she is able to humiliate and crush her opponent and deny his soul the necessary salvation.
Lines such as:

"My heart for his pleasure fared the same."

"What else he took will he give again."

"What else he broke will he ever join."

reveal Helen's hamartia. She has erred in assuming Keith of Ewern to be absolutely trustworthy and seduced by his false promises has lost her most precious possession her virginity. It is this which transforms her into an implacable person, bent upon revenge: "Fire shall forgive me as I forgive."

Her hamartia leads to her peripeteia. Once a free and innocent virgin, she now spends her life in disgrace in hiding. Formerly she spent many a happy moment in the open with her lover on the banks of the Boyne. But now she is forced into hiding, as she practises witchcraft on the very same person with whom she spent some of the happiest moments in her life. The phrase "Hate, born of Love," aptly sums up the reversal in her situation.

The peripeteia effects her anagnorisis. Helen knows fully well that the means she uses to seek her revenge is a deadly two edged sword. By practising witchcraft on Keith of Ewern she realises fully well that she will be burnt at the stake as a witch and that she is condemning
her soul to eternal damnation. "Yet here they [flames] burn but for a space, / Little brother!" poignantly give expression to her anagnorisis.

Similar to the sufferings of a greek tragic hero, Helen's sufferings are both physical and mental. Physically she is exhausted because she has been melting the wax figure for the past three nights:

"Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore,
   Sister Helen
And I'll play without the gallery door."
"Aye, let me rest, -- I'll lie on the floor,
   Little brother."

But her mental anguish is far greater than her physical suffering: on the one hand she feels humiliated at having been cheated by the very same person whom she loved deeply and trusted fully, on the other she has now decided to torture him to a slow and agonising death, fully aware of the consequences of her action, both in this world and in the next. The following lines succinctly reveal her psychological torment:

"My heart for his pleasure fared the same."

"What else he broke will he ever join."

"What else he took will be give again."

"Hate, born of Love, is blind as he."

"Yet here they burn but for a space."
Unlike Edward who does not suffer and who merely decides to go into self exile, Helen's suffering, like the greek tragic hero's will come to an end only with her death. The "dying knell" signals the end of Keith of Ewern's "mortal pain." Helen anticipates her fast approaching death when she says "And he and thou, and thou and I, [are likely to die] / Little brother," and it becomes a foregone conclusion when she looks forward to her life in hell; and exclaims: "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!"

Helen's "little brother" is her faithful and obedient accomplice. He has been with her all the three days and identifies himself completely with her interests. Nevertheless both physically and psychologically Rossetti distances him from Helen. By the time the three pleaders arrive on the scene, he has been shifted to "high up in the balcony" whereas Helen remains "on the floor." He is thus literally and symbolically positioned to play the role of an impartial mediator between Helen and the pleaders. Rossetti emphasises his non-involvement in the act of witchcraft, by presenting him as an innocent little boy who is only too restless and impatient to get out of the stuffy room to play.

From the reader's point of view he thus performs an important function. It is because of him that we get a bird's eye view of the entire action in the ballad. When Helen says, "Aye, look and say whatever you see, / Little brother," it is also meant for our own benefit, and we see what he sees and hear what he hears.
Helen's affectionate and fraternal relationship with him helps to humanise her, and reveals the tender side of her character. They both share a congenial and relaxed relationship. Helen is as concerned about him as he is of her: "Nay now, when looked you yet on blood, / Little brother?" ; "Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore, / Sister Helen." This happy relationship serves as a contrast to her hardhearted and revengeful attitude towards Keith of Ewern, and humanises her.

Young and innocent though he is, he cannot escape from the grim and macabre atmosphere which permeates the ballad: even he makes references to "death" and "blood" which surprise Helen. And finally, by being her accomplice, his fate is intertwined with hers, and he is expected to meet a pathetic end: "And he and thou, and thou and I, / Little brother."

The three pleaders arrive on the scene in a tearing hurry to rescue both Keith of Ewern alive body and soul. Although each one of them is distinct and possesses a separate identity, they have not been individualised by Rossetti, in order not to distract our attention and diminish the significance of Helen's character. Keith of Eastholm is the first to step forward. He is identified by "the white mane." He pleads with Helen for the space of six stanzas that Keith of Ewern wants her to lift the curse so that he could die quickly and peacefully. Next is Keith of Westholm. He is identified by "the white plume." He pleads with Helen for the space of five stanzas that Keith of Ewern wishes to see her and
seek her pardon before he dies. He also brings with him the love tokens
the lovers had exchanged during their courtship, hoping that Helen would
relent. The last pleader is Keith of Keith, the victim's father. He is
appropriately identified by "the white hair." He pleads with Helen for the
space of four stanzas that his son asks her to forgive him, so that although
he would die, at least his soul would be saved.

Although Rossetti has not presented the three pleaders as fully
rounded individual characters, the father Keith of Keith stands apart from
the other two pleaders. Physically he is identified by "the white hair"
which indicates that he is an aged person. The other two pleaders are
identified merely by "the white mane" and "the white plume" of their
horses. Both Keith of Eastholm and Keith of Westholm do not seem to
feel any sorrow at Keith of Ewern's condition, and they are able to speak
loudly and clearly, unlike Keith of Keith whose "voice is sad and weak"
because he is choked with emotion. Further, both Keith of Eastholm and
Keith of Westholm merely perform the role of the messenger. They
perfunctorily report and convey what Keith of Ewern has asked them to
convey to Helen. They don't actually plead with Helen to save his life.
On the contrary the father puts his heart and soul into his efforts to
save his son. When he reports to her that his son pleads her forgiveness
so that even if his body dies, at least his soul would be saved, Helen
retorts: "Fire shall forgive me as I forgive." But the father persists with
his own personal plea not merely to save the soul of his son, but 'To

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save his dear son's soul alive." [emphasis added] and when Helen refuses to relent, he does the ultimate act of submission, by "kneeling in the road". He thus does not hesitate to humiliate himself to save his son's soul from eternal damnation.

The arrival of the "three horsemen that ride terribly" creates a sense of urgency in the development of the story. Unlike in "Edward Edward" where the father has already been killed Keith of Ewern is on the verge of death and more significantly in danger of being condemned to hell, so they race with one another to reach Helen's residence with the aged father appropriately arriving there last:

"Oh, it's Keith of Eastholm rides so fast."

"Here's Keith of Westholm riding fast."

"Oh it's Keith of Keith now that rides fast."

They plead with Helen for the length of six, five and four stanzas respectively thus emphasising that time is running out quickly for Keith of Ewern; further the three pleaders speak rapidly one after another without discussing anything amongst themselves because there's no time to be wasted.

The three pleaders serve another important function. They help to clarify and define the plot of the story. Keith of Eastholm tells us what is happening at present:
"That Keith of Ewern's like to die."

and

"For three days now he has lain abed,
Sister Helen,
And he prays in torment to be dead."

and

"But he has not ceased to cry to-day,
Sister Helen,
That you should take your curse away."

Keith of Westholm reveals to us what has taken place in the past:

"He sends a ring and a broken coin,
Sister Helen,
And bids you mind the banks of Boyne."

And Keith of Keith, in a "sad and weak" voice reminds us of the future plight of his son's soul:

"Oh he prays you, as his heart would rive,
Sister Helen,
To save his dear sons soul alive."

This sort of a kaleidoscopic effect in which the past, present and the future are simultaneously presented is totally absent in "Edward Edward."
Although Keith of Ewern does not appear in person, his presence is strongly felt throughout the poem. Unlike Edward's father he is not yet dead, but is in the process of dying and being condemned to hell. His present agony is highlighted by the pleaders. At the end of the poem his death is announced and we have a glimpse of his fleeing soul:

"No vesper chime, but a dying knell,
Little brother!"

and

"More fast the naked soul doth flee,
Little brother!"

and

"A soul that's lost as mine is lost,
Little brother!"

However, inspite of his "mortal pain" the reader does not sympathise with him because he is directly responsible for his suffering. He is the villain who has used and deceived Helen. His suffering and punishment are thus justified; unlike in "Edward Edward" where our response is mixed because it is not clear whether the slaying of Edward's father was justified or not.

Both the stories are narrated by the simple device of an ongoing conversation between two persons. To enhance the speed and briskness of
the narration the entire conversation is presented by means of "unprepared dialogue": introductory or concluding expressions like "he said" or "she replied" are completely absent. Only the dialogue is presented within quotation marks.

"Edward Edward" is a direct face to face conversation between Edward and his mother. The mother opens the conversation with a question, to which Edward replies evasively which is refuted by her. This results in another evasive rejoinder from Edward, which in turn is again refuted by her, and this ultimately results in his confessing to his father's murder. After which follows the nuncupative testament of Edward which is set out as a catechism by his mother. The method employed is a very simple one: the mother asks all the questions and Edward provides the appropriate answers.

In all, five questions, all of them belonging to the wh-category are asked by Edward's mother:

i. 'Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude Edward, Edward?
   Why does your brand sae drop wi' blude,
   And why sae sad gang ye, O?' --
'And whatten penance will ye dree for that, Edward, Edward?
Whatten penance will ye dree for that?
My dear son, now tell me, O.'—

'And what will ye do wi' your tow'r's and your ha', Edward, Edward?
And what will ye do wi' your tow'r's and your ha',
That were sae fair to see, O?"—

'And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife, Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
When ye gang owre the sea, O'?—

'And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear, Edward, Edward?
And what will ye leave to your ain mither dear,
My dear son, now tell me, O'?—

"Every wh-question may be matched with a statement called its presupposition" (Quirk et al. 396). The respective presuppositions are:

i. Your 'brand' drops with 'blude' for some reason.

ii. You will do some penance for that.

iii. You will do something with your 'tow'r's' and your 'ha.'
iv. You will leave something to your 'bairns' and your wife.

v. You will leave something to your 'ain mither dear.'

All the five questions are asked by Edward's mother to elicit information, and Edward replies directly to her and supplies her with the necessary and relevant information. Once Edward confesses to patricide he decides to exile himself as atonement for his crime and to abandon all his material wealth, without providing for his family: "let them beg through life." Finally he condemns his mother to hell for her role in the murder.

"Sister Helen" is also in the form of "unprepared dialogue," but the overall process is more subtle and complicated. The poem is a dialogue in the real sense of the word. Unlike in "Edward Edward" where only the mother makes the observations and asks the questions and Edward supplies the answers, both Helen and her brother make observations, pass comments and ask and reply to questions.

The poem begins with a wh-question by the brother: "Why did you melt your waxen man, / Sister Helen?" But shortly afterwards Helen asks the questions even as the brother begins reporting to her what the three pleaders say. They thus carry on a conversation indirectly with her through her brother for she does not condescend to see them leave alone say anything to them. The poem ends with her brother asking two wh-questions and Helen's reply to these questions.
The actual conversation takes place only between Helen and her brother. The three pleaders find themselves in a very bizarre situation. They are in a desperate hurry to save Keith of Ewern's life, and more importantly his soul and there is no time for them to discuss anything amongst themselves; what they want to say they say it in breathless haste to the 'little brother.' He merely conveys to Helen what he sees and what he hears, without any comment or criticism. Helen communicates directly only with him and it is not certain whether he conveys her replies or comments to the three pleaders: When Keith of Eastholm desires to speak to her, Helen replies: "Oh tell him I fear the frozen dew, / Little brother" However, there is no indication that he does so. We have to assume that the pleaders overhear what Helen says, or that somehow what she says is communicated to them. Thus unlike in "Edward Edward" in which the conversation between Edward and his mother takes place in a simple and straightforward manner, in "Sister Helen" Rossetti complicates the process by subtly embedding the conversation between the pleaders and the 'little brother' within the conversation between Helen and her brother.

Helen's brother asks the following four questions:

i. "Why did you melt your waxen man, / Sister Helen?"

ii. "Is it in the sky or in the ground?"

iii. "Ah! What white thing at the door has crossed, / Sister Helen?"
iv. "Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?"

Questions 1, 3 and 4 are of the wh-type and presuppose that his sister knows the answers and will supply the necessary information. However only for the last two he receives a direct reply: "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!" For the first question he receives no answer at all. The second question is an "alternative question" which resembles a yes - no question, the statement form being: "it is in the sky or in the ground." Helen does not reply to this question also. He also asks another type of question called the "exclamatory question, which is a question in form, but is functionally like an exclamation" (Quirk et al. 400): "O Sister Helen, you heard the bell, / Sister Helen!" Helen replies that she heard the sound, and that he had guessed wrong: "No vesper-chime, but a dying knell, / Little brother!"

Helen who is practising witchcraft and is waiting patiently to execute her revenge, remains hidden from the view of the pleaders consequently six of the ten questions she asks are of the wh-type:

i. "Nay now, of the dead what can you say, / Little brother?"

ii. "Nay now, when looked you yet on blood, / Little brother?"

iii. "Little brother, whence come the three, / Little brother?"

iv. "What else he broke will he ever join, / Little brother?"

v. "What else he took will be give again, / Little brother?"
vi. "What here should the mighty Baron seek, / Little brother?"

But all the six wh-questions, unlike the wh-questions in "Edward Edward" which are direct and simple, are complex in the following ways:

(i) unlike "Edward Edward" which uses only "why" and "and what" as the wh-element, "Sister Helen" uses also the additional wh-elements like "when," "where" and "who."

(ii) Only the last three, begin with the wh-element proper. The first two are introduced by the "reaction signal" (Quirk et al. 413) "Nay now," and the third by the noun phrase "Little brother."

(iii) In question 6 the wh-Q word occurs in the prepositional complement "what here," whereas under normal circumstances "here" should have occurred before or after the verb "seek," consequently the significance of the place of action is emphasized even as an appropriately formal style of expression is conveyed, because it is now the elderly Keith of Keith who is speaking and moreover the requirement of rhyme is also satisfied.

(iv) Except for question 3 which is a simple and direct wh-question for which her brother provides the necessary information, all the other five questions are weighted with rhetorical implications and all five of them are positive questions which to the contrary connote strong negative assertions (Quirk et al 401). The supposed answers to the questions would be that her brother has not seen people dying or bloodshed, that Keith of Ewenn
will not be able to return what he has taken, he will not be able to join what he has broken, and that the Baron will find nothing at her residence.

(v) All the five questions reveal character and define relationships. The first two questions suggest to us that her brother is perhaps a small boy who has led a sheltered life protected from the harsh and brutal realities of medieval life. Her sisterly concern indicates a cordial relationship with her brother. On the contrary the remaining three questions reveal her anger and hatred towards the people who have wronged her.

Following are the yes-no questions which Helen asks:

i. "Hush, heard you a horse-tread as you spoke, / Little brother?"

ii. "Look, look, do you know them who they are, / Little brother?"

iii. "Nay then, shall I slay a living man, / Little brother?"

iv. "Say, have they turned their horses round, / Little brother?"

Questions 1, 2 and 4 have "positive orientation" (Quirk et al. 389). Helen is lying on the floor, and consequently she hears the sound of the fast approaching horsemen before her brother does. So she merely asks the first question to confirm her suspicion. She receives an affirmative answer. Similarly Helen asks the second question to confirm the arrival of Keith of Ewern's Kinsmen, to which her brother replies:
"Oh, it's Keith of Eastholm rides so fast, / Sister Helen." Similarly Helen has heard the death knell of Keith of Ewern. She knows fully well that the pleaders will have to return. So, completely ignoring her brother's question, "is it in the sky or in the ground?" she asks the fourth question seeking confirmation. Once again she receives an affirmative answer.

Question 3 is a yes-no question formed with the modal auxiliary "shall." It expresses "intermediate volition" (Quirk et al. 99) and "implicates the listener's will" (Quirk et al. 393). The implication being "Nay then, do you want me to slay a living man" and thus be branded a murderess." Keith of Westholm reports that Keith of Ewern wants her to lift her curse, so that he could meet his end quickly and painlessly. But Helen retorts that she is only melting a wax model of him, and that if she were to accede to his demand then she would have to murder him directly in cold-blood. This question proves that her mind is in a complete turmoil, and underscores the irony of her situation. She is determined to kill him and thus avenge her shame, but at the same time she does not wish to be stigmatized as a murderess and so ironically she resorts to witchcraft, fully aware of the dire consequences to her body and soul. Witchcraft, however, offers her the twin advantages of killing by remote control, and inflicting the maximum amount of suffering on her victim.

The conclusion of "Edward Edward" is abrupt. The father has already been murdered by Edward. The action has already been committed in the past. But what shocks us into perceiving the intrinsic dramatic irony
in the huddled ending is the sudden revelation that it is Edward's mother who is primarily responsible for the murder and that he has only been used as an instrument by her. The callous mother has all along been interrogating her son about the murder, while she is the person who actually knows more about it. And to make matters worse she is avaricious enough to inquire how much she stands to gain because of the murder. However all the tension and excitement evaporates immediately, as the poem ends in an anticlimax with the mother being let-off with a mild verbal curse.

On the contrary the conclusion of "Sister Helen" is a long drawn out process. The act is being committed in the present progressive. The whole atmosphere is charged with drama as we can vividly visualise Keith of Ewern slowly being tortured to death by Helen. The arrival of the three pleaders and Helen's remark in stanza 11: "The hour has come, has come at last, / Little brother!" marks the beginning of the end which continues till stanza 29 when she says: "No vesper-chime, but a dying knell, / Little brother!"; but ultimately it stretches to stanza 34 when Helen says: "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!" More than half the poem deals with the subtle and firm resolve with which Helen consummates her revenge not merely by torturing Keith of Ewern slowly to death and ensuring that his soul goes to hell, but also by humiliating his aged father by bringing him to his knees in the middle of the road. Rossetti keeps the suspense taut throughout — will she or will she not relent? The drama and the suspense are made keener by
Helen's ironic and equivocating replies to the insistent pleas of Keith of Ewern's kinsmen.

The conclusion of "Edward Edward" does not fulfil the condition of poetic justice. The punishment does not suit the crime. The reason for doing away with Edward's father is never revealed, so it is impossible to determine whether it was just to kill him or not. Edward self-righteously curses his mother's soul to hell, even as he decides to flee the country to escape detection and punishment for his crime. Both mother and son remain virtually unpunished at the end of the poem.

But this is not the case with "Sister Helen." Keith of Ewern has used Helen to satisfy his lust, and then refused to marry her. Helen punishes him by torturing him to death slowly by resorting to sorcery, and worse she condemns his soul to hell, by binding him with a curse, and preventing him from confessing his sins to save his soul:

"But he has not ceased to cry to-day,

Sister Helen,
That you should take your curse away."

and

"Oh his son still cries, if you forgive,

Sister Helen,
The body dies but the soul shall live."
The punishment is both physical and spiritual. In return Helen is aware that she will be burnt alive at the stake as a witch, and that her soul will also go to hell:

"Fire shall forgive me as I forgive, / Little brother!"

and

"A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!"

Thus poetic justice is executed, unlike in "Edward Edward" where virtually no physical or spiritual punishment is actually meted out.

"Edward Edward" is a domestic story, and hence Edward's mother at the end is more concerned about Edward's family and personal property:

‘And what will ye do wi' your tow'rs and your ha'
      Edward Edward?'

and

‘And what will ye leave to your bairns and your wife,
      Edward, Edward?’

"Sister Helen" on the other hand is a story about wronged love: "Hate, born of Love, is blind as he, / Little brother!" When it is reported by Keith of Eastholm that Keith of Ewern "melts before a flame," Helen retorts passionately: "My heart for his pleasure fared the same, / Little brother." Keith of Westholm recalls vividly their intense moments of romance:
"He sends a ring and a broken coin, / Sister Helen, And bids you mind the banks of Boyne." All this gives "Sister Helen" a certain poignancy which is lacking is "Edward Edward."

Poignancy is wanting in "Edward Edward" because at the end both Edward and his mother do not feel guilty, nor do they feel regret for what they have done. Edward is totally unconcerned about the fate of his personal property and family, while he decides to go into self exile for the ostensible purpose of doing "penance," while actually the real reason is to escape punishment. The order of the questions highlights their indifference: Edward’s mother first questions him about his material possessions, only then about his family.

On the contrary "Sister Helen" is an emotionally charged poem in which there is no reference whatsoever to material possessions at all. Nearing the end of his life Keith of Ewern’s suffering and pain force him to feel guilty and express regret for what he had done, and seek the forgiveness of the person whom he wronged: "He yields you these and craves full fain, / Sister Helen, / You pardon him in his mortal pain."

Even Helen for all her steely resolve voices her guilt by trying to convince herself and asserts that she is actually not a murderess when she says: "Nay then, shall I slay a living man, / Little brother?" the implication being that she is only melting a wax model of Keith of Ewern.
Traces of regret and remorse for what she has done are evident when she says: "But he and I are sadder still, / Little brother!"

The total lack of concern or feeling towards the victim, coupled with the absence of guilt and regret deprive "Edward Edward" of tragedy and pathos. Both mother and son are alive at the end of the poem, without even affecting a plea or a defence, leave alone offering a motive for their cruel deed. But Helen on the contrary meets a truly tragic and pathetic end. She stoically accepts both the physical and spiritual consequences of her deed: "Fire shall forgive me as I forgive, / Little brother!" ; "A soul that's lost as mine is lost, / Little brother!"

Thus with regard to all the aspects studied in this chapter—the story element, in mediares, the dramatic method of presenting the story, time, place, atmosphere, characterisation, dialogue and conclusion—Rossetti's literary ballad "Sister Helen" is definitely more sophisticated and complex than its medieval original "Edward Edward." The detailed analysis clearly establishes that "Sister Helen" is not a pastiche. Rossetti is not a mere copyist, but a creative artist whose poetic genius has created a new and unique work of art, even as he escapes to the glorious medieval past by writing a literary ballad "Sister Helen" in conscious and deliberate imitation of the traditional medieval ballad "Edward Edward."