

# Life Lines

A Shared Reading activity pack  
to read wherever you are

Issue 29

" The thought was like an electric shock - there was one spot in her memory which seemed to promise her an untried spring, where the waters might be sweet."

*Janet's Repentance, George Eliot*

The Reader is a charity which usually brings people together to listen to stories, extracts and poems in free, weekly Shared Reading groups. In these Life Lines activity packs we hope to offer everyone the same comfort, meaning and connection through great literature that our reading groups provide – wherever it finds you.

Each Life Lines pack will bring you some of a story and a poem, which you can read in your own time. Along with the reading, you'll find a selection of thoughts and feelings shared by other fellow readers about the chosen pieces. We suggest that reading the poem or the story out loud is a great way to fully immerse yourself in the reading experience and discover your own personal connections with the material. It may feel strange but it does make a difference, so do please give it a try!

*This week's story is called Janet's Repentance by George Eliot. Following years of abuse from her drunken husband, Janet is turned through misery and shame to drink herself. Here she has been thrown out onto the street in the middle of the night and has sought refuge with her neighbour, Mrs Pettifer. As day dawns she is reflecting on her past, including her own mistakes and need for help, and also the future, as she imagines how she might begin to seek that help. Mr Tryan is the newly arrived Reverend, deeply unpopular with many in the village including her husband. There is so much in this passage, do feel free to make notes on your own thoughts and feelings as you go , perhaps marking words or sentences that particularly stand out to you, and go back and re-read to help it soak in.*

## **Janet's Repentance** by George Eliot, Chapter 17

Janet lay still, as she had promised; but the tea, which had warmed her and given her a sense of greater bodily ease, had only heightened the previous excitement of her brain. Her ideas had a new vividness, which made her feel as if she had only seen life through a dim haze before; her thoughts, instead of springing from the action of her own mind, were external existences, that thrust themselves imperiously upon her like haunting visions. The future took shape after shape of misery before her, always ending in being dragged back again to her old life of terror, and stupor, and fevered despair. Her husband had so long overshadowed her life that her imagination could not keep hold of a condition in which that great dread was absent; and even his absence – what was it? Only a dreary vacant flat, where there was nothing to strive after, nothing to long for.

At last, the light of morning quenched the rushlight, and Janet's thoughts became more and more fragmentary and confused. She was every moment slipping off the level on which she lay thinking, down, down into some depth from which she tried to rise again with a start. Slumber was stealing over her weary brain: that uneasy slumber which is only better than wretched waking, because the life we seem to live in it determines no wretched future, because the things we do and suffer in it are but hateful shadows, and leave no impress that petrifies into an irrevocable past.

She had scarcely been asleep an hour when her movements became more violent, her mutterings more frequent and agitated, till at last she started up with a smothered cry, and looked wildly around her, shaking with terror.

‘Don’t be frightened, dear Mrs Dempster,’ said Mrs Pettifer, who was up and dressing, ‘you are with me, your old friend, Mrs Pettifer. Nothing will harm you.’

Janet sank back again on her pillow, still trembling. After lying silent a little while, she said, ‘It was a horrible dream. Dear Mrs Pettifer, don’t let anyone know I am here. Keep it a secret. If he finds out, he will come and drag me back again.’

The daylight changes the aspect of misery to us, as of everything else. In the night it presses on our imagination – the forms it takes are false, fitful, exaggerated; in broad day it sickens our sense with the dreary persistence of definite measurable reality. The man who looks with ghastly horror on all his property aflame in the dead of night, has not half the sense of destitution he will have in the morning, when he walks over the ruins lying blackened in pitiless sunshine. That moment of intensest depression was come to Janet, when the daylight which showed her the walls, and chairs, and tables, and all the commonplace reality that surrounded her, seemed to lay bare the future too, and bring out into oppressive distinctness all the details of a weary life to be lived from day to day, with no hope to strengthen her against that evil habit, which she loathed in retrospect and yet was powerless to resist.

### **Pause for thought...**

*There is so much in here that it is worth pausing for a moment to take stock and have a think about our first impressions. It feels like there is struggle for change taking place here, in the midst of this bleak moment. **‘Her ideas had a new vividness’** and yet that change is being held back by fears which have **‘so long overshadowed her life.’** I wonder how it feels to be in this in-between place, and how it might be possible for Janet to **‘keep hold of’** a new condition? What do you make of the change the daylight brings? Often people say ‘things will seem better in the morning’ but does the daylight have that effect here? Let’s follow Janet’s thoughts a little further...*

Her husband would never consent to her living away from him: she was become necessary to his tyranny; he would never willingly loosen his grasp on her. She had a vague notion of some protection the law might give her, if she could prove her life in danger from him; but she shrank utterly, as she had always done, from any active, public resistance or vengeance: she felt too crushed, too faulty, too liable to reproach, to have the courage, even if she had had the wish, to put herself openly in the position of a wronged woman seeking redress. She had no strength to sustain her in a course of self-defence and independence: there was a darker shadow over her life than the dread of her husband – it was the shadow of self-despair. The easiest thing would be to go away and hide herself from him. But then there was her mother: Robert had all her little property in his hands, and that was scarcely little enough to keep her in comfort without his aid. If Janet went away alone, he would be sure to persecute her mother, and if she *did* go away – what then? She must work to maintain herself; she must exert herself, weary and hopeless as she was, to begin life afresh. How hard that seemed to her! Janet's nature did not belie her grand face and form: there was energy, there was strength in it; but it was the strength of the vine, which must have its broad leaves and rich clusters borne up by a firm stay. And now she had nothing to rest on – no faith, no love. If her mother had been very feeble, aged or sickly, Janet's deep pity and tenderness might have made her daughter's duties an interest and a solace; but Mrs Raynor had never needed tendance; she had always been giving help to her daughter; she had always been a sort of humble ministering spirit and it was one of Janet's pangs of memory, that instead of being her mother's comfort, she had been her mother's trial.

Everywhere the same sadness! Her life was a sun-dried, barren tract, where there was no shadow, and where all the waters were bitter.

No! she suddenly thought – and the thought was like an electric shock – there was one spot in her memory which seemed to promise her an untried spring, where the waters might be sweet. That short interview with Mr Tryan had come back upon her – his voice, his words, his look, which told her that he knew sorrow. His words had implied that he thought his death was near; yet he had a faith which enabled him to labour – enabled him to give comfort to others. That look of his came back on her with a vividness greater than it had had for her in reality: surely he knew more of the secrets of sorrow than other men; perhaps he had some message of comfort, different from the feeble words she had been used to hear from others. She was tired, she was sick of that barren exhortation – Do right, and keep a clear conscience, and God will reward you, and your troubles will be easier to bear. She wanted *strength* to do it right – she wanted something to rely on besides her own resolutions; for was not the path behind her all strewn with *broken* resolutions; How could she trust new ones? She had often heard Mr Tryan laughed at for being fond of great sinners. She began to see a new meaning in those words; he would perhaps understand her helplessness, her wants. If she could pour her heart out to him! If she could for the first time in her life unlock the chambers of her soul!

The impulse to confession almost always requires the presence of a fresh ear and a fresh heart; and in our moments of spiritual need, the man to whom we have no tie but our common nature, seems nearer to us than our mother, brother, or friend. Our daily familiar life is but a hiding of ourselves from each other behind a screen of trivial words and deeds, and those who sit with us at the same hearth, are often the farthest off from the deep human soul within us, full of unspoken and unacted good.

When Mrs Pettifer came back to her, turning the key and opening the door very gently, Janet, instead of being asleep, as her good friend had hoped, was intensely occupied with her new thought. She longed to ask Mrs Pettifer if she could see Mr Tryan; but she was arrested by doubts and timidity. He might not feel for her – he might be shocked at her confession – he might talk to her of doctrines she could not understand or believe. She could not make up her mind yet; but she was too restless under this mental struggle to remain in bed...

Two hours passed in this way. The rain went on drizzling, and Janet sat still, leaning her aching head on her hand, and looking alternately at the fire and out of the window. She felt this could not last – this motionless, vacant misery. She must determine on something, she must take some step; and yet everything was so difficult.

It was one o'clock and Mrs Pettifer rose from her seat, saying 'I must go and see about dinner.'

The movement and the sound startled Janet from her reverie. It seemed as if an opportunity were escaping her, and she said, hastily, 'Is Mr Tryan in town today, do you think?'

'No I should think not, it being Saturday, you know,' said Mrs Pettifer, her face lighting up with pleasure; 'but he *would* come, if he was sent for. I can send Jesson's boy with a note to him any time. Should you like to see him?'

'Yes, I think I should.'

'Then I'll send for him this instant.'

## Pause for Thought...

*What do you make of that moment where this thought strikes like ‘an electric shock’? Have you ever experienced a sudden turn around in thinking like this? It seems interesting that this thought, which feels new, comes from ‘one spot in her **memory**’. Can an old memory return to us as a new thought further down the line? Sometimes things which seemed insignificant at the ‘time’ take on a new significance as our situation changes, perhaps? I’m thinking here about the ‘new meaning’ that Janet sees in the ‘often heard’ words about Tryan’s fondness for sinners...Why does that ‘new’ meaning strike her here, what has changed?*

*We see a movement between past and future again when we are told that Janet ‘wanted something to rely on besides her own resolutions; for was not the path behind her all strewn with broken resolutions? How could she trust in new ones?’ I wonder how much bearing our past path has on our road ahead. Is there ever a way of trusting again what has been broken?*

*I was interested in the idea that we need ‘a fresh ear and a fresh heart’ for confession. Do you agree with that? I wonder why Janet doesn’t pour her heart out to Mrs Pettifer, for example, who is already near and seems perfectly kind and willing to help?*

*Towards the end of the chapter Janet is feeling ‘she must take some step; and yet everything was so difficult.’ In the end, the thing that pushes her to ask about Mr Tryan is the feeling ‘an opportunity were escaping her’. The word ‘opportunity’ here feels close to ‘hope’, which was so painfully absent earlier in the chapter. So even though the thinking she has been doing hasn’t felt like action, it does feel like a shift or movement has occurred, doesn’t it? It might be small, tiny even, but there is a change there. How important do you think this quiet, inward movement is, in order for outward change to happen?*

*I’m very keen to read about this meeting with Tryan himself now and follow Janet’s journey. The full story is published in George Eliot’s *Scenes Of Clerical Life* if you would like to read more.*



## *Time for a poem ....*

We'll pick up with another story again in our next issue, but now a pause for some poetry. Poetry isn't always easy for everyone to get going with. In our Shared Reading groups we read a poem out loud a few times, to give ourselves a bit of time to hear it aloud. Give this a go yourself and see if it helps you to feel comfortable with the words, even if you're still not sure what it's all about!

We aren't looking to find an answer here, or what the person writing it might have meant when they wrote it. We're just looking to see if any feelings or ideas come up when we read it – and often we find that the more time you allow yourself to simply be with the poem, the more thoughts and feelings will come through.

One of the keys is to enjoy yourself: take your time, read it out loud, have a think about any bits you like, or that puzzle you, then... have another read!

*This week's Featured Poem is Say Not The Struggle Naught Availeth by Arthur Clough. When we are in the middle of a struggle of any kind, how do we find the strength to carry on? How big a part does hope play, and where does hope come from? In the passage we have just read we thought about how inward movements impact on outward behaviour. Let's have a look at this wonderful poem now, taking time to re-read and reflect as we go, and see if it helps us work our way into some of these big thoughts.*

## Say Not The Struggle Naught Availeth

Say not the struggle nought availeth,  
The labour and the wounds are vain,  
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,  
And as things have been they remain.

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;  
It may be, in yon smoke concealed,  
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,  
And, but for you, possess the field.

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light,  
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,  
But westward, look, the land is bright.

By Arthur Clough

*What do you make of that word 'Struggle' in the first line? What do you think of when you read that word? I wonder why the instruction is to 'say not' How does what we say to ourselves impact us? I'm interested in the line 'as things have been they remain'. It feels like being stuck, unable to see a way out or a route towards change. How do you feel at this point in the poem?*

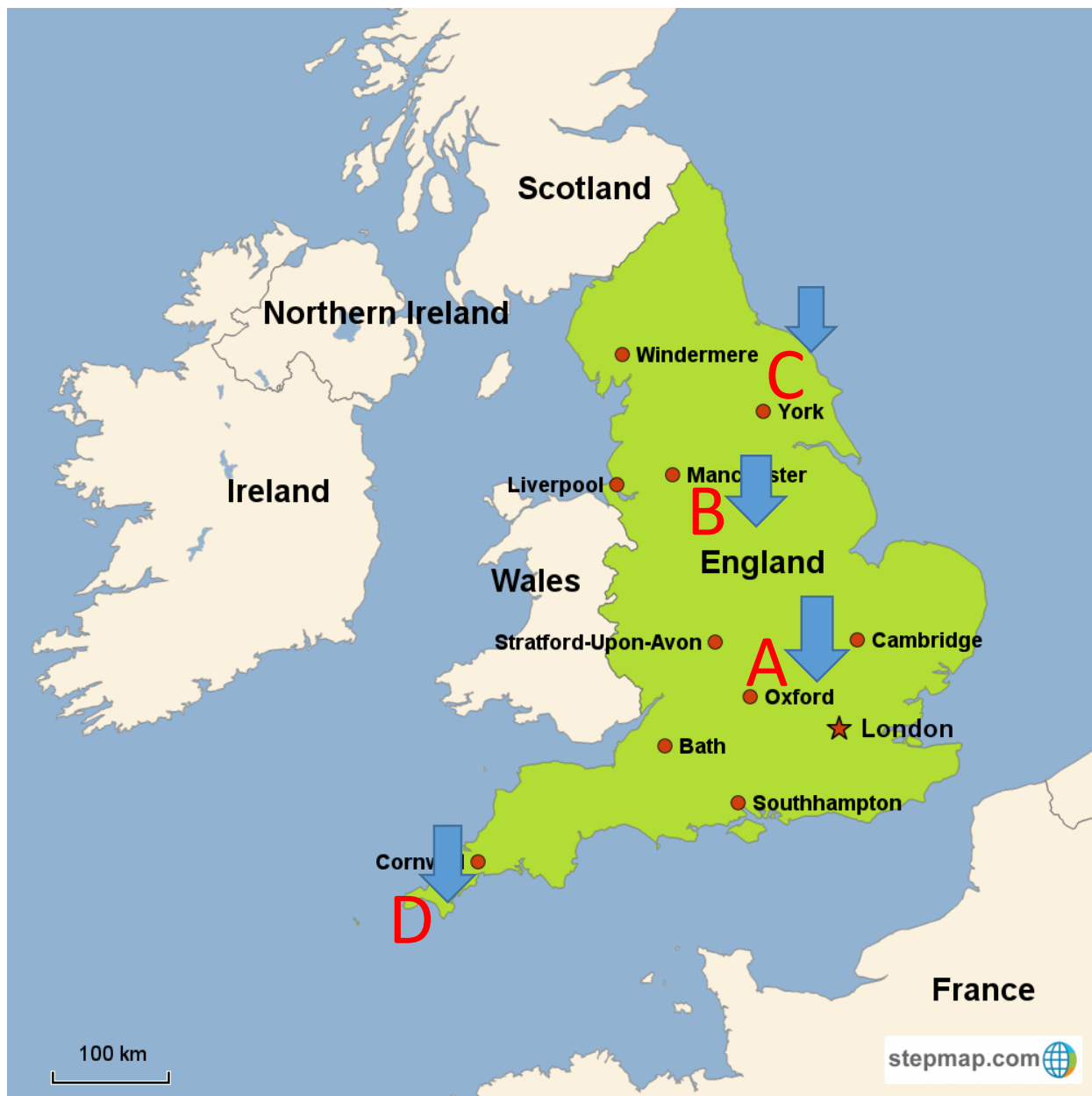
*How do we feel about the 'hopes' and 'fears' in the next line? Can hope and fear exist alongside each other, or does one have to triumph? I'm thinking again of Janet here and the way hope and fear seem to play off against each other as she contemplates her future. It's intriguing that progress seems to be made, not through powerful dramatic waves, but 'Far back, through creeks and inlets', small, insignificant seeming, compared with the might and power of the ocean and its crashing waves. What do you make of that line? Can we think of moments in our lives where hope or progress have come from surprising places?*

*How do we feel at the end of the poem, as the sun rises and we watch this light appearing, 'slow, how slowly!' How does that slowness make you feel? What difference does it make to turn our gaze westward? I wonder in what ways might this moment feel something like the 'electric shock' for Janet of realizing the promise of 'an untried spring', or does this feel like a more gentle, gradual movement?*

*We've left this page blank for you to make notes,  
draw a picture, have a go at writing yourself or jot  
down something you'd like to tell us...*

A large rectangular box with a black border, intended for drawing or writing. The box is mostly empty, except for a V-shaped notch cut out of the bottom center. The notch is formed by two diagonal lines meeting at a point, with horizontal lines extending from the top of the V to the left and right edges of the box.

As well as reading materials, we've also included a puzzle for you to have a go at while you're having a cuppa. Janet's Repentance is set in the fictional town of **Milby** in the English midlands. But I wonder if you can name the real English towns beginning with M located on this map? Answers in no particular order at the bottom of the page...



## Answers:

Mullion - D  
Middlesborough - C  
Macclesfield - B  
Milton Keynes - A