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Better for Having Known Him?

Feminine Desire in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*

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Abstract

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By Joel Dobben

George Eliot's final two novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, portray the struggle of Victorian female characters to mediate impulse and societal constraint. Their plots deal with female desire for independence, but they also hint at the limits of freer sexual expression. There has been, in the last thirty years, a wealth of literary criticism about sexual matters in two novels which at first glance do not dwell on matters of bodily desire. In most interpretations, the characters of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* are freed from the sterility of their Victorian marriages through finding male partners who have both greater sexual potency and a feminine sensitivity. This distinction is not so clear, as the two texts hint at undercurrents of sexual desire motivating these women when they enter problematic marriages.

This essay first explores how these women desire, and why they choose the husbands they do. They struggle to manage their sexuality when its natural development carried a stigma. The author posits that Dorothea and Gwendolen, born in this construct, develop desires that conform to Victorian attitudes yet are off-kilter from normalized sexuality. Their initial choices of partners express queer desire, in an expansive sense, and it hints at the essential falseness of the repressive construct created for 19th century women.

They then fall in love with virile yet effeminate men who openly scramble the lines of heterosexuality and gender difference. This paper looks at Will's and Daniel's sameness as well as difference, or Otherness. Their mere existence hints at the possibilities of a hidden world of freer sexual expression, yet they also function in this repressive society. They possess a curious liminality that limits their ability to fully lift Dorothea and Gwendolen from their miserable marital situations. Eliot does not give her two heroines happy endings, although she does offer the possibility of living within a system, to reach understanding and an emotional union with other people through empathy, conveyed in the novels in ways which connote eroticism. This paper explores the sexuality of the novels while essentially reaffirming their nuanced bleakness.

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Introduction

Long and dense, George Eliot's novels have little appeal for modern readers. The tomes carry little of the unbridled passion of Dickens, the salacious intrigue of Collins or the jauntiness of Trollope. They portray Victorian Britain as it was, and their trenchant realism often fails to resonate with a 21st century audience. They are also so suffused with wise sayings and allusions that anything more than a perusal can be overwhelming for readers. Part of the problem for a contemporary audience, especially in Eliot's final two novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, relates to the heavy narrative commentary. There is no cool remove from the action; the narrator goes in and out of the most private thoughts of characters, laying bare their conflicted motivations. Everything is articulated; there seems to be no mystery in Eliot.

This attitude is wrong. Eliot's work contains, despite its greater subtlety and sophistication, a constant struggle, especially for female characters, to mediate between impulse and societal constraint. The plots of her final two novels are about female desire for independence, but they also hint at the limits of freer sexual expression. There has been, in the last thirty years, a wealth of literary criticism about sexual matters in two novels which at first glance do not dwell on matters of bodily desire. From these perspectives, the characters of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* are freed from the sterility of their Victorian marriages through finding male partners who have both greater sexual potency and a feminine sensitivity.

There is no question that both women suffer from the constraints of a society that both repressed and idealized women as gentle, submissive creatures. In her landmark

study *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter articulated the Victorian ideal of woman as a man's helper:

Her innate qualities of mind were formed to make her man's complement rather than his equal...Furthermore, women were mentally constituted to take care of children, as well as physically constituted to give birth (Showalter 123).

Despite their procreative natures and responsibilities, women were paradoxically considered non-corporeal, human beings who do not desire. Society's attitudes towards women had shifted dramatically in the past two centuries. Writing on Victorian gender relations, Frances Knight says that, rather than descendants of sinful Eve, "women were seen as more virtuous and less prone to temptation" (Knight 32). Christianity in that era still puritanically emphasized original sin and the essential lowliness of man in the cosmic system, but it no longer directly saw women as particular purveyors of sin. "Christian writers in the nineteenth century frequently asserted that it was the Christian religion above all else that had raised woman to her true and honourable status in society" (Knight 25). However, as we shall see, these two women are "tempted," and have to find a way to mediate their sexuality in a manner that will conform to this attitude.

This essay first explores how these women desire, and why they choose the husbands they do. They struggle to manage their sexuality when its natural development carried a stigma. "Menstruation sharply marked the beginning of a different and more limited existence. Simply to manage the hygiene of menstruation in a household where it could not be acknowledged or revealed created a sense of anxiety and shame" (Showalter 57). Critics tend to view Dorothea's and Gwendolen's situations in the novels to be born

out of Victorian sterility, and their problems are solved by being awakened by male figures who stand consciously and unconsciously against these values. I do not see this line as so clear.

In fact, I posit that Dorothea and Gwendolen, born in this construct, develop desires that conform to Victorian attitudes, yet they reveal something off-kilter from normalized sexuality. Their initial choices of partners, Casaubon and Grandcourt, express what I consider queer desire, in an expansive sense, and it hints at the essential falseness of the repressive construct created for 19th century women. They fall in love with virile yet effeminate men who scramble the clear lines of heterosexuality and gender difference. The exoticism of Will Ladislaw and Daniel Deronda has been widely discussed, and critics like Alicia Carroll and Jacob Press have written convincingly about their queer sexuality. This sexuality contains a freedom and an innocence. Unlike Dorothea's and Gwendolen's dark initial desires, their sexuality does not have the taint of conformity.

This paper looks at Will's and Daniel's sameness as well as difference, or Otherness. Their mere existence hints at the possibilities of a hidden world of freer sexual expression, yet they also function in this repressive society. They possess a curious liminality that limits their ability to fully lift Dorothea and Gwendolen from their miserable marital situations. In fact, Eliot offers no real escape from the Victorian system at all. In *Daniel Deronda*, she appropriates Jewish people and culture, with their oppression and marginalization, as a possible avenue of escape from the confines of Victorian and Christian culture, but Daniel's liminality inhibits his ability to fully escape into the Otherness that provides his mark of difference.

This paper attempts to blur the distinction previous readers have seen in the novels between sterile Victoriana and the free sexuality of their male romantic heroes. I derive this interpretation from the simple fact that Eliot does not give her heroines happy endings, or even ambiguous but positive ones. What she does offer is the possibility of living within a system, to reach understanding and an emotional union with other people through empathy, conveyed in the novels in ways which connote eroticism. I want to explore the sexuality of the novels while essentially reaffirming their nuanced bleakness.

Chapter One

Strange Fires

Sigmund Freud, a voracious reader, loved *Middlemarch*, writing that it illuminated the intricacies of his own marriage (Johnstone 133). This seems like little more than the average encounter between the landmark novel and a perceptive reader, but Freud's theories offer effective ways of framing the sexuality of Eliot's iconic, erratic heroines Dorothea and Gwendolen. Although some of his ideas have been disproved, Freud could detect genuine currents of sexuality inherent in even quotidian activities, and his theories offer a way of teasing out the repressed sexual desires of two female characters who seemingly do not desire.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he replaces his initial dichotomy of sex and ego drives with the death drive, which he now considers the most basic drive (Freud 46). He goes so far as to assert that "the aim of all life is death." He borrows from Plato's *Symposium* to posit that that "living substance at the time of its coming to life was torn apart into small particles, which have ever since endeavored to reunite through the sexual instinct" (70). Freud recognizes this as unlikely, writing of his hypotheses, "I am not convinced myself and that I do not seek to persuade other people to believe in them" (71). Still, the idea provides an interesting way of viewing human longing. For Freud, death represents a reunion of the self. Although Freud viewed religion with ambivalence and some distaste, this can be used as a way to understand the innate human longing to have a creator, to be a part of a cosmic system that transcends everyday life (Crockett 77).

At the same time, humans have the opposing sexual drive, which points towards life. People have drives both to reunite themselves into an organic whole and to reproduce. Despite the unscientific nature of this theory, it rings emotionally true. People mediate between a desire to make themselves part of a larger whole, often expressed through religious faith, and the more self-empowering desire to create. Although Eliot's heroines consistently challenge Freud's simplified notions of the nature of human drives, the theory also provides a framework with which to interpret the seemingly inexplicable choices of Dorothea and Gwendolen. These are women who behave in the exact opposite manner of what would be considered their best interests. However, far from the traditionally erratic female figures of literature, these are women whose very poor choices come more from the head than the heart. I suggest that these women's actions represent a performance of the mediation between opposing drives much like those suggested by Freud, drives made especially difficult to reconcile in the repressiveness of traditional Victorian society.

Dorothea and Gwendolen in many ways reject their own femininity, dissatisfied with its association with corporeality. Most readers see this dissatisfaction as a kind of strength. Each young woman attempts to assert herself as more than a traditional fawning, socially adept wife and mother, embodied acidly by Rosamond Vincy, before being beaten down by repressive patriarchal society. This perspective seems reductive. Both noble Dorothea and crafty Gwendolen are well-positioned socially and intelligent enough to find better options for themselves than their disastrous marriages. They are not sheep led to slaughter at the hands of male figures; these ladies should know better.

Repressive Victorian mores are ingrained in these two young women. Indeed,

both females have fairly establishmentarian aspirations. Gwendolen wants money and security, and Dorothea wants, more commendably, to contribute to society's progress. Neither of them seeks to enact radical change, and this plays out in the way they struggle to repress their sexual desires. I would like to suggest that their choices in husbands offer a glimpse at the queerness, an expansive term I will later elucidate, inherent in the ways the two women attempt to reconcile their procreative powers with a psychological need to deprecate and deny their bodies' needs and abilities.

Few characters in literature personify this mediation more than Dorothea, who attempts to reconcile youthful sexual desire with her ambition to find a God absent from her life. Even before we meet the oddly harsh young woman, she becomes implicitly tied to sexualized religious longing through the reference to St. Theresa of Avila. The girl cares not for a life of passion. "What were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (3). Psychoanalytic critic Jill Matus claims that the narrator does not address the erotically charged nature of Theresa's writings, yet the concept of a fire fed from within searching for an object for aimless passion seems explicitly sexualized (Matus 216). Eliot undoubtedly recognized the orgasmic connotations of the phrase "rapturous consciousness."

In her writings, Theresa represented her relationship with God as being profoundly painful and decidedly erotic. The most famous of these involved her claims of being spiritually and physically penetrated by an angel:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it (Lewis 266-267).

Many scholars have pondered how a woman who devoted her life to the church could produce something as salacious as George Herbert's "Love (III)" and brutal as the rape in John Donne's "Batter My Heart." The tip of the angel's phallic spear has a fire, something that can meet the burning inside Theresa. The angel penetrates repeatedly and deeply, leaving her awakened with ecstasy. Sensations of pain and pleasure intersect for Theresa. In all her writings she preaches the merits of total subjection to God; this includes erotic subjection as well. God's penetration provides the transcendental experience she has sought. Matus believes Eliot glosses over this, but the language which introduces her in the novel says differently.

Like Theresa, Dorothea is a sexually mature and desirous woman, despite her outward rejection of the warm sensitivity of traditional Victorian womanhood. Victorian society's expectations of how a woman should behave involved an uncomfortable mediation. Females were considered sensitive and romantic creatures who needed to be protected from their basic corporeality. This is, of course, a common trope throughout the Victorian novel, but most Victorian heroines resolve it through required heterosexual love and marriage. Matus frames Dorothea as suffering from hysteria, and her curious way of

sexual expression can be understood through Showalter's reimagining of the disorder as "a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options" (Showalter 147). Dorothea, although she seeks to accomplish some unfeminine things, is not really protesting anything. She struggles to twist natural sexual desire into something acceptable.

From her introduction, her mediation seems at once asexual and queerly sexual. She wants to sublimate any activity associated with pleasure. She decides wearing jewelry is an earthly extravagance, despite Celia's pragmatic protests. She considers horseback riding too erotically stimulating an activity. She seemingly does not desire at all, which prompts many readers to assume she's motivated purely by a single-minded desire to stimulate social change. She wants a life of the mind, with all its connotations of masculinity, yet there is really nothing unfeminine in the way she behaves. In fact, she seems frustratingly unaware of her own sexual allure, which everyone around her, including and especially Celia, notices. Her maddening idealism, viewed in the context of her new sexual maturity, seems borne out of a different kind of female mediation.

Eliot chooses to depict St. Theresa because she represents everything that seems impossible in 19th century Britain. The political progress embodied by the battles for political reform in 1829-1831 and the beginning of the era of industrialization characterize the era portrayed by the novel. In this world there is no potential for union through a bridging of an ontological divide; only people attempting, usually unsuccessfully, to be happy. Unlike in Eliot's earlier work, these provincial villagers do not even attempt to find God through the usual channels of churchgoing. The ultimate realist novel, *Middlemarch* portrays a world marked by God's total absence. As T.R.

Wright states with breathtaking assuredness, the novel:

never for a moment suggests that God might exist. It is, however, a religious novel in the broad sense that it is concerned with religious need, the desire to find unity, meaning and purpose in life, in a world in which God, to use one of the key words of the novel, is a 'blank' (Wright 141).

Wright refers primarily to every person's understandable desire for a "Key to All Mythologies," but the novel does indirectly portray ingrained religious belief in its characters in a decidedly unsympathetic way.

While Eliot's earlier novels, such as *The Mill on the Floss*, contained direct attacks on religious zeal and traditional Christianity, this novel examines how men and women behave in a society founded on religious underpinnings. None of these characters believe that an experience like St. Theresa's could happen to them; most of them probably do not take Theresa's claims literally. The provincial characters would never question the existence or power of a triune God. However, they sense and accept His deafening silence. Dorothea's ambition contains an inherent desire to be close to a silent God, but her world paradoxically contains no capacity for passionate experience as part of its Puritan austerity. She wishes to transcend the bonds of Victorian society to achieve a kind of spiritual experience, through the accumulation of knowledge and spurring of gradual social change.

Here, Freud's earlier stated principle can be introduced in an attempt to understand what precisely is at work in Dorothea's mind when she makes these choices. After a deeply repressive upbringing free of the influence of parents, she finds herself

mediating her drives through the association of sex and death. When she learns that the conventionally masculine Sir James Chettam is in love with her, she is more than impatient with his perceived lack of seriousness. The thought of his virility literally sickens her:

The revulsion was so strong and painful in Dorothea's mind that the tears welled up and flowed abundantly. All her dear plans were embittered, and she thought with disgust of Sir James' conceiving that she recognized him as her lover (23).

This man is a figure of vibrant fleshiness, one who exudes a sense of erotic potency detected by Celia and the townspeople of Middlemarch. Dorothea's idealistic energy, or "ardor," ostensibly overpowers any sort of sexual drive, but perhaps her choice of husband is a kind of expression of desire.

She chooses to marry Casaubon, whose age and supposed breadth of wisdom could make him a fatherly figure. This brings to mind Carl Jung's Electra complex, developed as a response to Freud's Oedipal complex. In Jung's theory, a woman attempts to mediate her repressed sexual desire for her father. The text seems vulnerable to this type of simplified reading; Dorothea is missing a daddy, so she marries one. However, the Electra complex requires an awareness between father and daughter of procreative powers (Jung 69-70). There is nothing procreative about Casaubon. Purely a man of the mind, above the everyday corporeality of other men. He is the ultimate Father figure, Godlike in his perceived possession of all knowledge and total physical abstraction.

The Brookes' provincial neighbors find the match repellent, rightly viewing the scholar as a dour, deathly figure. Sir James says Casaubon "has got no good red blood in

his body” (45). He earlier claims the scholar “has one foot in the grave” and Mrs. Cadwallader replies, “he means to draw it out again” (37). The acid-tongued matron also says that Dorothea is as “good as going to a nunnery” (38) with this marriage, but marrying a seeming paragon of pedantic sterility does necessarily indicate a willful sublimation of erotic desire. Dorothea is even rather attracted to Casaubon: she finds his skeletal features a welcome change from the “blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type” (11). She has “the dreams of a girl whose notions about marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life, an enthusiasm which was lit chiefly by its own fire” (50). “Exalted” and “ends of life” imply something not merely spiritualized but extreme, beyond life. She is attracted to what is beyond the reaches of her own life, and is therefore drawn to the deathly scholar.

Eliot provocatively equates God with death, and the necrophiliac nature of the marriage disturbs because Dorothea is the only member of this couple with any of the fire of life. Unlike regular intercourse, necrophilia is about one person’s pleasure, a type of autoerotic behavior. Dorothea marries into a kind of death as a method of satisfying her “own fire,” what feminist critic Catherine Maxwell’s “The Brooking of Desire” identifies as masturbatory. Unsurprisingly, the marriage fails. Casaubon fails to stimulate Dorothea in any spiritual or physical way, but she has really has never viewed her husband as anything more than a tool to achieving her own kind of ecstasy. “Casaubon may be an inadequate lover, but Dorothea is chiefly distressed because he lacks any kind of imaginative sympathy with her and proves totally unfitted to help her develop her own intellectual and inner life” (Maxwell 124). Dorothea’s pain in the marriage comes from a spiritual degradation that is self-inflicted.

Casaubon is not a malevolent patriarchal figure; he is death himself, possessing an inner life so hollow to be almost non-existent. Like God, he is totally absent, and it is observation of that absence which so hurts Dorothea. His soul is “too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying” (176). Elizabeth Hale writes that “Casaubon is thus the full-fledged monster of *Middlemarch*, a repulsively decaying body with a vacuum at its core...Because his desiccated obsession fills his mind and heart, Casaubon’s inner life has no space for anything connected to the world of the living” (Hale 65-66).

There is simply nothing there, but Dorothea does not want to forge a union with another hot-blooded human. Her “ardor” is totally powered by reflexive, masturbatory energies. Hale places Casaubon in the context of the Gothic villain. “It is this essential emptiness that solidifies Casaubon’s role as the monster of the novel. By definition, a monster is an object to be observed from the outside” (Hale 66). However, he really does not actively seek to hurt Dorothea. He neglects to teach her anything, or seek her assistance in research. He really does not do anything with her. Because Dorothea observes this vacuum from the outside, she experiences an erotic subjection different from the merely physical, and this subjection is self-inflicted.

Still, Dorothea maintains a fervent devotion to her marriage that becomes evident only when Casaubon is dying. He asks her to promise him to continue his research. Despite realizing the futility and non-existence of a “Key to All Mythologies” Dorothea, “crushed by opposing fears” (296) acquiesces. The passage presents a woman in bondage. Dorothea is “too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on

her husband to do anything but submit completely” (298). Bernard Paris, in his original *Experiments in Life*, says that Eliot glorifies the way in which Dorothea submits to her husband. In his later reappraisal of her work, *Rereading George Eliot*, he revises his personal opinion of the work to say that Eliot positively portrays a masochistic behavior. He claims neither Eliot nor Dorothea sees “that we do not have a moral obligation to submit to other people’s claims and that we have a right to defend ourselves against them” (Paris 42). He gives the character little credit, despite her intelligence and privilege, and he ignores Eliot’s personal independence altogether.

He poses the question, “What does Dorothea dread? I think it is less her husband’s pain than the self-hatred and despair she would feel if she violated her inner dictates and shattered her idealized image of herself” (Paris 43). However, he provides no evidence to support the fact that Dorothea still has this idealism, as it has already been shattered with the realization of her husband’s spiritual impotence. Paris assumes the objectivity of the narrator in the portion of the novel, when Dorothea’s “noble habit of the soul reasserts itself” and she makes her “resolved submission” (266). Yet this novel’s narrator often speaks from a given character’s subjective perspective, and this could very well be true here. Dorothea’s rationalization of her decision does not indicate Eliot champions it. There may be no answer to Paris’ question of what Dorothea dreads. She puts herself in the painful and demeaning position of agreeing to continue his research. She cannot assert her independence even when she knows she faces no force to stand up against. Her spirit innately turns to hurt itself.

It is important to see Dorothea’s behavior throughout the novel in an eroticized context; otherwise *Middlemarch* is vulnerable to an oversimplified psychoanalytic

reading of Dorothea's eventual awakening. When she and her husband arrive in Rome, she has a sexualized experience viewing the works of art on display. "The gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritism...Dorothea had no such defense against deep impressions" (124). The city deeply penetrates the young woman's psyche, and Dorothea subsequently has an intellectual passion and curiosity she has previously lacked. This raises uncomfortable questions for modern readers about Eliot's perspective on what precisely Dorothea desires. After all, she has a sexually ungenerous husband and is unhappy; she finds a more virile and commanding male interest and is happy. Does Eliot illustrate a chauvinistic Freudian notion that what Dorothea needs is a proper male sexual partner?

Maxwell's concept of Dorothea's ardor being essentially autoerotic undermines this idea. Dorothea does not need a man to hurt her to get pleasure; she has been hurting herself for the entire novel. When she does experience conventionally masochistic romantic feelings, they are in regard to the object of her desire, Will. Maxwell points out, "Even late in the novel when Dorothea realizes that Will's feelings for her echo hers for him, the text shows her interesting disinclination to envisage any possible resolution for this desire" (Maxwell 125). I will later go into the nature of Will's allure, but there is nothing specifically gendered in the painful enjoyment she experiences. She gets a kind of curious pleasure from keeping the object of her desire at bay, and even more oddly, it is this idea of keeping Will unattainable that proves to be a healthier mode of desire as Dorothea leaves her ideals behind.

Like Dorothea, Gwendolen experiences a type of redemption when her capacity

for unfulfilled desire is awakened. While Dorothea's sexuality first manifests itself through a desire to subject herself to a metaphysical figure, the nature of Gwendolen's sexual drives is not essentially autoerotic. Susan Ostrov Weisser claims that Gwendolen "functions by *not* desiring, thus protecting herself from the vulnerability of either loving too much or not being loved in return" (Weisser 3). While Dorothea wishes to escape her own corporeality, Gwendolen is motivated by controlling her social environment rather than any kind of warped idealism. Weisser believes she is a more intelligent, controlled and of course sympathetic revision of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, an unabashedly materialistic and ruthless social butterfly. Gwendolen has no ardor and no real center.

However, like Dorothea, she rejects her own corporeality in an effort to work within and overcome Victorian restrictions. For her, it is less due to dissatisfaction with the body's inability to transcend a mundane and unfair world than a fear of the body's weakness. Gwendolen feels a pathological need to be in control, and that shows in her self-denial of the vulnerability inherent in desire. Her desire is not autoerotic because her only erotically tinged feelings come from having a partner to control. Dorothea rejects phallic horses entirely; Gwendolen wants to "mount the chariot and drive the plunging horses herself" (119). She fits more within Showalter's view of hysteria as a method of rebellion and self-assertion. A figure of even more sexual allure than Dorothea, Gwendolen envisions herself as using her feminine wiles to assert a position of masculine dominance. This unfolds scintillatingly when she first meets Grandcourt. Far from a soft Venus, she is known as a "Diana" on the archery field, a reference to the masculine goddess of hunting. Hunting, with its penetration of flesh with phallic arrows, proves to be exactly what Gwendolen means to do with her poaching of a husband. Like the

seraph's spear found in St. Teresa's writing, this woman operates in a manner that is sexually aggressive and curiously masculine.

Although her marriage goes terribly awry, a modern reading of the novel could make Gwendolen's behavior seem admirable. She attempts to use the system of courtship and marriage to build a stable and independent life for herself. Her strength makes her far more palatable to a modern reader than Dorothea or most other Victorian heroines, yet Eliot's narrator has an immense animosity towards the young woman, most likely because she so revels in the weakness of others. Her attitude towards Grandcourt seems too predatory to conclude she wants him only for status. Despite her claims to herself that she wants a husband who will allow her to control her own life, Gwendolen is excited by the concept of having power over a man:

He was adorably quiet and free from absurdities—he would be a husband to suit with the best appearance a woman could make. But what else was he? He had been everywhere and seen everything. *That* was desirable, and especially gratifying as a preamble to his supreme preference for Gwendolen Harleth. He did not appear to enjoy anything much. That was not necessary: and the less he had of particular tastes or desires, the more freedom his wife was likely to have in following hers (119).

Grandcourt's experience is what makes him so desirable for Gwendolen. He is older and has travelled widely and still seems willing to let her be in control. She feels the thrill of power over someone more accomplished and supposedly better than she is. She does not want to learn something from this man; she wants all of his years of full living under her

thumb.

She also seems excited by his very vacancy and the perceived weakness in his interactions with her. “Grandcourt’s bearing had no rigidity; it inclined rather to be flaccid” (145). He is always relaxed and unemotional in his interactions with Gwendolen, so she believes his seeming apathy indicates pliability. Weisser points out the “demonic and serpentine” (Weisser 4) imagery in Eliot’s portrayal of Gwendolen. She is a “sort of serpent” (40) and has a “demonic ancestry.” Like a Satanic figure, she desires to penetrate and control all those around her. Gwendolen resents the position she has been put in and wants to upend the balance of power in Victorian society. She represents a kind of Antichristian figure in the way she wants to sow chaos provocatively through control of her husband. Weisser is wrong that Gwendolen does not desire; she possesses a curious desire that revolves entirely around sadism.

Unfortunately for Gwendolen, Grandcourt is exactly the same way, down to the serpentine imagery. Gwendolen envisions him early in the novel as a lizard, dull and emotionless. However, Weisser notes that “He is not asexual: snake-like, he can stiffen to strike at any moment” (Weisser 5). He has an aggressive sexual potency, and, like Gwendolen, he is a pure sadist. She receives a far worse than needed comeuppance when she chooses to marry him. When the narrator first enters his mind, he is portrayed with a kind of emptiness:

He was not a wordy thinker, and this explosive phrase stood for mixed impressions which eloquent interpreters might have expanded into some sentences full of an irritated sense that he was being mystified, and a determination that this girl should not make a fool of him (116).

He here seems archetypically English. He says ““Damn her!”” to himself much like Chettam (116). This displays a conventionally masculine fear of not being taken seriously, and a hypersensitivity to romantic rejection. Grandcourt’s quintessential Englishness is more than a pretense; he fully embodies the male Victorian mindset and its buried sadism.

Inherent in this mindset lies a capacity for cruelty. Grandcourt recognizes the pleasure Gwendolen gets both from toying with him and from the prospect of using him through marriage. When Gwendolen says ““Some women can,”” he replies ““You certainly, unless you are obstinately cruel”” (118). Such a line normally would be considered playful banter, but Grandcourt speaks in a “broken, refined drawl” (118). A humorless man, he is being uncomfortably direct with Gwendolen rather than flirtatious. His “eyes she had felt to be upon her throughout their conversation. She was wondering what the effect of looking at him would be on herself rather than on him” (118). He is a blank slate, and that blankness, that lack of a core to a very English man, unsettles her as it should. Ironically, Gwendolen drops her riding whip in her nervousness. Already she begins to lose her will to dominate.

Grandcourt, stolid, perpetually bored, only feels fulfilled when subjugating women as strong as Gwendolen or his former mistress Lydia:

He had no taste for a woman who was all tenderness to him, full of petitioning solicitude and willing obedience. He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him, and who perhaps would have been capable of mastering another man (395).

He behaves as a classical rather than Christian god, capriciously manipulating environments to upend the expectations of Gwendolen and force her into blind submission. He has his manservant Lush set up the meeting between Lydia and Gwendolen, so Gwendolen will always feel guilty about the marriage.

Eliot only hints at Grandcourt's use of sex as intimidation, but Gwendolen's dropped whip reappears in an anecdote a mother tells her daughter during the Grandcourts' wedding. "I've heard my mother say Squire Pelton used to take dogs and a long whip into his wife's room to frighten her" (309). Robert McCarron doubts that the marriage is physically violent, citing Grandcourt's distaste for violence:

While it is unlikely that Eliot is suggesting that Grandcourt is overtly violent with his wife in their sexual relations...the psychological effect is essentially the same. Grandcourt has realized Gwendolen's sexual fears, and, simply demanding his marital rights, enjoys her unspoken revulsion and his own vastly enhanced mastery (McCarron 79).

Despite his cruel mischief, Grandcourt's pleasure comes from little that is outside of the sphere of traditional husbandly duties. McCarron points at how Eliot strains in the second half of the novel to mitigate Grandcourt's monstrosity by recounting his early life, but I wonder if those anecdotes serve more to reaffirm Grandcourt's normalcy rather than extend the narrative's imaginative sympathy.

Like the Casaubons, the Grandcourts are not a perversion of a traditional marriage. Their marriage points at the perversion inherent in traditional marriage. The

husband must be a figure of invulnerability; the woman must be submissive. This blind sense of invulnerability on the part of the male gives marriage the sadistic and religious hue underlined by the novel. This opens the novel to a simplified feminist reading, with a woman repressed brutally by a patriarchal figure. However, this glosses over the agency, albeit limited, that both women possess. They are shaped by a repressive society, but Victorian influence gives birth to curious modes of desire.

The nature of Dorothea and Gwendolen's marriage choices, which are ill-advised yet establishmentarian, offer a glimpse into the problematic nature of female sexuality in this period. Dorothea wants to achieve sexual ecstasy through encounters with a Godlike, non-corporeal figure. For Gwendolen, sexual satisfaction lies in the subjugation of others. Gwendolen represents a cautionary sequel to Dorothea's eroticized awakening. Dorothea achieves ecstasy through a humanized yet painful type of penetration. Gwendolen is also sexually subjected to a virile male partner and unambiguously suffers for it. Both modes of expressing female sexuality prove disastrous and immensely painful for the two women. The sexual desire inherent in establishment values corrodes them, and, as I shall discuss later, Eliot sees little in the way of positive alternatives.

Many Victorian novels portray the corruption, often carnal, beneath the veneer of genteel Victorian society, but these novels show the darkly dysfunctional nature of the veneer itself. This society breeds darker types of sexual desire which often are at odds with the normative values society professes. As non-normative behaviors embedded in normative society, they fit under David Halperin's expansive definition of queer sexuality. "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is identity

without an essence...not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (Halperin 62). Dorothea and Gwendolen have desires which are outside the realm of accepted sexual and romantic practice. Indeed, “accepted” practices in marriage show themselves to be, in the case of the Casaubons and the Grandcourts, themselves outside of the norm.

The modes of sexual expression created to conform to societal structures prove immensely painful to the young women. The closest thing to a positive path comes to these heroines when they find people who stand at least partially outside of this construct. They find objects of desire, Will Ladislaw and Daniel Deronda, who possess a skewed, off-kilter sexuality more openly. The two men share an unconventional masculinity that interacts with mainstream society yet rejects it. They are queerly half a part of these women’s worlds and half representative of the Other. This liminality proves to be what grants these women a path of escape from restrictive and sterile normalized society.

Chapter Two

That Obscure Object of Desire

The objects of desire who provide something resembling redemption for Dorothea and Gwendolen are neither chivalric heroes nor traditional figures of salvation. Both are sensitive, as befitting many romantic heroes written by female novelists, but Eliot takes this sensitivity much farther. These are men who look and act in a feminine manner. At other points in the novels, they seem to stand outside the bounds of gender entirely. They possess a flexibility of gender reminiscent of Renaissance literature. Writing on *Hamlet* and *Daniel Deronda*, Robert Sawyer applies the “double consciousness” Eliot admired to the portrayal of gender in the two works. Both men “are sensitively sympathetic, both question their manhood (as well as their origins), both possess feminine as well as masculine attributes, and, perhaps most important, both have intense relations with women” (Sawyer 32). There are of course also their attitudes and behavior, constantly upending what others expect of them. Eliot portrays these attributes with a kind of sparkling admiration found few other places in her work. Their rejection, both conscious and unconscious, of a Victoriana that actively seeks to put the body and its urges at a distance makes them paradoxically transcend the ordinary trappings of humanity through their atypical corporeality. However, critics like Sawyer ignore that both men are still bound to the worlds in which they were raised. This dualism and intermediacy adds complexity to these pretty boys.

Eliot envisions Daniel Deronda and Will Ladislaw as liminal figures, mysteriously indeterminate figures straddling the world of their realist narratives and the

heritage of some other world that can never be fully articulated. They stand outside of Englishness, while also behaving with some distinctly English characteristics. Many scholars point to the innate Otherness of the two men while ignoring the relative smoothness with which they move through Victorian society. They are liminal figures whose dual existence provides a form of redemption for Dorothea and Gwendolen, but they also cause much pain and frustration. They are not chivalric heroes by any means, but, curiously, they provide a kind of redemption for the two women through the desires they spark.

The two novels disinter the essential dangerousness of normalized notions of desire imposed by Christian society. Women, associated with the body, are both vulnerable and need to be dominated. The two heroines respond to the genteel brutality of Victorianism and its Christian values through possession of what can be considered a kind of queer desire, desires which are dysfunctional and perpetually frustrating for the two women. The passions invoked by two marginalized male figures also place these new desires outside the accepted bounds of mainstream sexuality. Something about the liminal, rather than establishmentarian, natures of these desires make them healthier for the heroines, even if they do not necessarily result in happy endings for the women.

To understand the appeal of these men, I turn again to psychoanalysis and Jacques Lacan's claim in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* that "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan 235). The Other (Autre) represents a universal ideal that manifests itself as different objects to different people. Psychoanalytic critic Clayton Crockett articulates the concept best:

The particular object is a manifestation or encapsulation of the Other as a

whole...to desire another person sexually or romantically is not only to desire that particular person in his or her uniqueness and singularity, but it also to buy into what that person represents socially and symbolically, even if only as a rebellion against prevailing tastes and norms (Crockett 83).

The theorists frame this concept of the Other as the social unconscious, but Will and Daniel's transcendence of Victorian society reaches past normative gendered behavior to an almost ontological difference. They not only stand partially outside of society, they stand partially outside the limits of ordinary humanity.

To put Eliot in dialogue with Lacan helps readers understand what precisely each man means to each woman in the novel, but while Lacan frames the Other as a dark figure, Eliot casts the men in a positive light through their liminality. Both men are mysterious figures, but they behave in a resonantly ordinary way. Daniel is a figure of exoticism, but he is also such a paragon of virtue that one of the major questions of the novel proves to be why Eliot so idealizes him. Will Ladislav is also virtuous, queer in his sensual power yet disarmingly unselfish, but his mischievous nature makes him the more immediately striking figure.

Will is perpetually associated with females, most prominently his ill-fated grandmother, Julia. The lady's unusual face hangs in a portrait in Dorothea's bedroom, and Dorothea finds the portrait intriguing enough to recount her impression of it to Casaubon:

Those deep grey eyes rather near together-and the delicate irregular nose with a sort of ripple in it-and all the powdered curls hanging backward. Altogether it

seems to me peculiar rather than pretty. There is not even a family likeness between her and your mother (48).

After first appearing frustratingly staid with her aversion to corporeality, Dorothea's strong interest in the portrait first awakens ripples of a new kind of desire. She wants to submit herself to an absent God, but she is instantly attracted to something that lies beyond the daily surface quotidian of her provincial life. It is the strangeness of the portrait which spurs her interest.

The grandmother is not attractive, but that is unnecessary to awaken Dorothea's desire. She is rather attracted to the unattractive. In Rome she finds herself overpowered by the works of art she views, but she does not find them particularly pretty. At the start of the novel she has no interest in art, and even when she begins to long for an alternative to her stifling marriage, she tells Will she believes much of the art in Rome is unattractive:

There are comparatively few paintings that I can really enjoy. At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with frescoes, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe--like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own. But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one, the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me (131).

She continues by admitting, "I enjoy the art of all sorts here immensely" (132). She may find something odd and almost grotesque about individual works of art, yet her

envelopment by the “gigantic broken revelations” indicates an attraction and willingness to submit to them. Psychoanalytic critic Peggy Johnstone claims that “Dorothea’s distaste for anything associated with sensuality is also suggested by her incapacity to appreciate works of art” (Johnstone 144). Dorothea does indeed say that “the life goes out of them,” but she is fascinated by the unseen implied by these images. Elizabeth Hollander, writing on the portrayal of visual art in Eliot, writes that in Victorian fiction art serves to “underscore the difference between verbal and visual experience, the silence of the image figuring the elusiveness, the fixity, or the totality of the truth which the narrative can only gradually unfold” (Hollander 169). She is wrong in the sense that this particular narrative seeks to articulate the visuals on display. Dorothea, as well as the narrator, is self-consciously intrigued by the elusiveness and primacy of both Julia’s portrait and the Roman art.

Conveniently, Will enters her life at the point when she is first awakened by this passionate, at times unattractive humanism on display in the works she views. Casaubon’s young cousin is introduced in much the same way as his grandmother, with flowing curls and a nose that “ripples,” a word that holds effeminate, aquatic connotations. From first introduction, he exists as a kind of mermaid, occupying multiple realms. In Dorothea’s mind, the memorable portrait actually morphs into the face of Will: “the colours deepened, the lips and chin seemed to get larger, the hair and eyes seemed to be sending out light, the face was masculine and beamed on her with that full gaze” (173-174). To a woman who has desired a force totally absent from the world, the simple presence of a young man pulsating with energy startles and attracts.

Despite being described with similar features, Will is actually more effeminate

than the masculine-looking grandmother. Luckily for Dorothea, the actual flesh and blood manifestation of Otherness is a beauty. He is a figure of androgyny, and he appears childlike when Dorothea first meets him:

He was the elder by several years, but at that moment he looked much the younger, for his transparent complexion flushed suddenly, and he spoke with a shyness extremely unlike the ready indifference of his manner with his male companion (130).

From the start, the narrator does not make the young man out to be a shining image of manhood. His description matches that of a conventional heroine more than Dorothea's. His smile is a "gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm, and banishing for ever the traces of moodiness" (131). His skin is so light as to be clear, and his exuberance inspires an allusion to a non-gendered spirit. He visits Dorothea when she is in the grips of distress over her rejection from Casaubon. No knight in shining armor, Will is more like a fairy, a figure from outside the realm of the known. He has the spirit of both a Victorian gentleman and Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a playful figure who tears down the social structures around him with little regard to the lives he disrupts. He has arrived to lift Dorothea from the depressing realities of Victorian marriage that she is just beginning to fully realize, but their ride will not be smooth.

In *Dark Smiles*, Alicia Carroll claims that the implicit comparison between this

young man and the dead woman whose marriage Casaubon finds so distasteful serves to place this new figure in a shroud of mystery (Carroll 99). However, she focuses on the physical description, overlooking the fact that the omniscient narrator promptly enters Will and reveals thoughts that are admittedly romantic while also basically normative. Will, like every other character in the novel, finds Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon ridiculous and alarming. Despite his exotic appearance, his mindset shares that important perspective with the provincial characters. "He was divided between the impulse to laugh aloud and the equally unseasonable impulse to burst into scornful invective" (131). So, in essence, he feels precisely the same way about the marriage as Mrs. Cadwallader, Sir James and the rest. His difference confirms that they are correct. Will is at once a manifestation of the Other and a figure that is essentially British. He is ever so slightly off-kilter in comparison with the mind of Casaubon and the body of Sir James.

Dark, almost prissy, Will is idealized by many readers because of his sensitivity. The son of a Polish refugee, Ladislav has an exotic background that is more hinted at than fully articulated. Rumors fly through the village about his highly suspect origins. Staid Middlemarch buzzes with talk about his possibly Jewish heritage. With one foot in the world of mainstream society and another in a kind of vague exoticism, Will represents a non-socialized Other, specifically a figure of Jewish heritage. However, this is not Bronte's Heathcliff, an exotic figure placed by an author into the mainstream of European Christian society. The details of Ladislav's background are simply too humdrum when malicious Raffles finally reveals them. Ladislav learns his grandmother married a shady, implicitly Jewish pawnbroker. He first feels shame at the discovery that the web of gossip in Middlemarch about his genealogy has been proven to be true, but in

a novel as logistically precise as *Middlemarch*, the story of his grandfather is remarkable only in the way the town's provincial bigots turn it into cause for scandal. This subplot's biggest irony proves to be the lack of exoticism in Will's ancestry. The source for his difference cannot be explained away with a scandalous backstory.

Carroll makes a strong case for Will's queer sexuality, but she glosses over how these attributes do not come from the shadowy grandfather but from the supposedly corrupted grandmother Julia. The same blood that produced Casaubon produces Ladislaw. Often reading these figures as diametrically opposed, readers and critics alike overlook this familial link. The queerness comes from Will's Englishness. Even a prototypically masculine figure like Sir James may have the capacity for sexual proclivities outside of the mainstream, but he chooses to repress them while Will wears his off-kilter sexuality openly. Herein lies the contrast between mainstream Victorian sexuality and this playful Other who produces these feelings in Dorothea.

Will's perpetual "good-humour" that Dorothea so admires embodies itself in ways that further tie him to children. He has a "fondness, half-artistic, half-affectionate, for little children-the smaller they were on tolerably active legs, and the funnier their clothing, the better Will liked to surprise and please them" (287), a feminine trait in Victorian culture. He likes the energy and innocence of children and perhaps also their apathy for social decorum. He blends wide-eyed exuberance with exoticism and idiosyncrasy, and he deploys it for mischief. He freely sprawls himself across the rugs in provincial drawing rooms. Carroll makes Will out to be the victim of the intolerance of the village, but his vitality indicates he thoroughly enjoys playing provocateur.

With remarkable ease, Dorothea falls for Will's grinning lack of inhibition. She

finds herself attracted to the way he physically stands against a conventional man of mind, Casaubon, and of body, Sir James. Will's persona combines vitality with an independence of mind, but his slipperiness makes him an object of desire. To a sheltered European woman, he comes from another world entirely, and that provides the excitement. Although he does possess a kind of queer sexuality, Will's femininity does not hint at any sort of repressed lesbian desire on the part of Dorothea. Rather, he partially represents a world without boundaries, free from the binary oppositions of manhood displayed by the novel's other main characters. That extends to his sexual allure.

Of course, this object of desire does not immediately free Dorothea from pain and suffering. She rather enjoys withholding fulfillment despite his eagerness to become her partner. Feminist critic Catherine Maxwell better articulates the nature of Dorothea's desire than any critic, but she curiously does not address the masochism inherent in Dorothea's longing for Will. "The joy was not the less-perhaps it was the more complete just then-because of the irrevocable parting" (392-393). Will possesses a pseudo-Renaissance beauty, and Dorothea's desperate longings for him recall the masochism of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 88," addressed to a young boy:

That thou in losing me shalt win much glory:
 And I by this will be a gainer too;
 For bending all my loving thoughts on thee,
 The injuries that to myself I do,
 Doing thee vantage, double-vantage me (88:8-12)

As in Shakespeare's narrator, there is an unabiding love for the object, even happiness, as the lover is abandoned. Dorothea finds pleasure in the withholding of fulfillment. After Will's flirtation with Rosamond and the scandal of his background lead him to leave Middlemarch, Dorothea sleeps on the floor in her bedroom to punish herself for letting him go. Her self-flagellation is normal, but the dual pleasure and pain of Renaissance desire turns to submission to a very Victorian self-punishment that I will later address, a masochism endemic to the whole culture, because it is the only way she knows how to react.

In the context of Dorothea's Victorian upbringing, devotion to this half-Other does indeed have darker elements. This man should be a figure of freedom from the self-abasement inherent in worship, but she so adores this sprite that she idealizes him more than arguably she should. Her willingness to submit provides the jarring underlying tone of *Middlemarch's* conclusion. Dorothea ends up essentially serving Will. She has given up on her ideals of giving her life to society as a whole in order to give her life completely to one person. For a Victorian woman, this would have been a conventional and happy ending, but Dorothea has the acumen and spirit to have been more.

At least Dorothea ends up with someone for whom she has genuine feelings. Gwendolen cannot say the same, as Daniel leaves England with Mirah while the young widow stays in England alone to find her own way in the world. Despite this, and curiously because of it, it is the impossibility of a union between the pair that gives Gwendolen the ability to grow into a fully formed human being. After spending her life seeking to dominate completely, she finds herself passionately in love with another man. One of the great questions of the novel proves to be why this man, and why this form of

masochism, is preferable when the object has absconded.

What sets Daniel apart from Will is his unfailing goodness. Will is precocious, erratic and iconoclastic. Daniel decides to stand apart from Victorian society, but he seems like a frankly rather dull and weak figure in comparison to *Middlemarch*'s male hero. Unlike Gwendolen's sadistic husband Grandcourt, Daniel finds himself subjected to Gwendolen's magnetism from first glance. "Was the good or evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?" (3). These opening lines of the novel's first chapter show the power dynamics inherent in conventional depictions of male desire, with a man rendered powerless by an attractive female and also attempting to reassert dominance.

Daniel stares at Gwendolen with a penetrating gaze that is typically male. He wishes to enter her mentally and physically, to understand the inner life of a lady who has decided to take part in gambling. She is attractive, but she takes part in a risky and frivolous activity. She raises in Daniel "a growing expression of scrutiny, tending farther and farther away from the glow of mingled undefined sensibilities forming admiration" (5). There is nothing unusual about Daniel's initial male gaze, both in its sexual attraction and stolid disapproval, yet something about him rattles Gwendolen:

The darting sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior, that he was of different quality from the human dross around her, that he felt himself in a region outside and above her, and was examining her as a specimen of a lower order, roused a tingling resentment which stretched the moment with conflict (6).

Ostensibly she resents his sense of superiority, which he does possess, but few men would not disapprove of such an unseemly activity. The narrator, by entering Daniel's mind, has reaffirmed his essential Englishness, a quality of which Gwendolen has seen much. Her impression of Daniel does not come from his conscious will; it comes from his physical difference. Her sense of his feeling of being "outside and above" is not consciously projected but inherent. She resents him because his difference hints at something outside of the Victorian mindset, which she falsely believes she understands.

As traditional marriage crushes Gwendolen, she grows increasingly drawn to more than Daniel's kindness after he returns Gwendolen's father's necklace to her. The act carries along with its goodness an air of Ladislav's impropriety as it establishes a secret, penetrative bond with the young woman. At the same time, it also reaffirms Daniel's adherence to Victorian values. "Establishing himself as an intimate 'stranger,' Deronda paradoxically reminds Gwendolen of her 'virtue' and, in returning her father's necklace in the handkerchief, of her place within the patriarchal culture" (Carroll 115). There is also of course Daniel's beauty, even more pronounced than Will's, to draw in Gwendolen.

Although any reader would likely assume Daniel is handsome, the narrator does not fully elucidate his attractiveness until his reappearance after the reader learns Gwendolen's background story. Unlike that of the extended Casaubon clan, his physical exoticism cannot be found in the faces of any of the Mallingers. "The family faces of various types, seen on the walls of the gallery, found no reflex. Still he was handsomer than any of them, and when he was thirteen might have served as model for any painter

who wanted to image the most memorable of boys” (146). Again, as with Will and Rome, art frees the desirable male character from the constraints of Victorian ideas of masculinity. In this novel as well, art reveals the queerness buried in traditional society. The same family that produces the stolid, though insidious ordinariness of Grandcourt can produce the elusive handsomeness of Daniel.

This sexual attractiveness is expressed but not described in detail until later in the novel, when Daniel first saves Mirah. While Will takes a childlike joy in his exoticism, reveling in it without quite understanding its riskiness in this society, Daniel possesses an acute awareness of his own difference. “The ardour which he had given to the imaginary world in his books suddenly rushed towards his own history and spent its pictorial energy there, explaining what he knew, representing the unknown” (147). He devotes his youth to the elusive world of stories, and the accompanying creative, presumably sexual energy that comes with his adolescence brings a sense of something absent and mysterious in his identity. He feels uneasy with the Mallinger family, feeling misplaced, yet he is certain Sir Hugh is his father. He is aware of his own liminality and feels most at home boating on the ultimate liminal space of a river.

It is in this space that the narrator first catalogues Daniel’s significant physical allure. The narrator begins by looking at his corporeal inconsistencies:

The voice, sometimes audible in subdued snatches of song, had turned out merely a high barytone; indeed, only to look at his lithe powerful frame and the firm gravity of his face would have been enough for an experienced guess that had no rare and ravishing tenor such as nature reluctantly makes at some sacrifice (164).

His voice is higher than the average man's, and his body is powerful yet lithe. His hands are not "small and dimpled" but "long, flexible, firmly-grasping hands, such as Titian has painted in a picture where he wanted to show the combination of refinement with force" (164). He exhibits both the refinement of Victorian society and the forcefulness of the Other. "And there is something of a likeness, too, between the faces belonging to the hands--in both the uniform pale-brown skin, the perpendicular brow, the calmly penetrating eyes" (164). He is, in his distinctive brown appearance, the perfect man. He also transcends gender with the brownness of masculinity at its most primal and the paleness associated with femininity. Again the word "penetrating" appears, confirming the considerable sexual power of his appearance. At the same time, this virile creature is more virtuous than the novel's heroine, scrambling Victorian assumptions of purity as a female trait. He is living, breathing paradox.

Sensitive and strong, Daniel is "not seraphic any longer: thoroughly terrestrial and manly; but still of a kind to raise belief in a human dignity" (164). To be seraphic is to be angelic, a Christian figure of beauty but also strength. Daniel's admirable qualities come from his corporeality. This is no absent creature to be worshipped. He is very present and vulnerable. "Not seraphic any longer" shows how Eliot has created an angelic image before rejecting it for a human one. It is an essentially humanist comment on the ability of a man, one born outside of traditional Christian Victorian society, to transcend the supposedly powerful forces of God that are absent from the novel. Like *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* contains none of the supernatural atmospherics common

to the Victorian novel. Daniel's final discovery of his Jewish heritage seems more like a welcome coincidence than a Dickensian webbing. None of the actions of the novel indicate the existence of a higher power.

Eliot upends traditional roles of gender and ontology in her establishment of Daniel as an admirable figure. However, for all the powers attributed to him, the iconoclasm he represents comes more from his elusive background and physicality than his behavior or decisions. Far from embracing his own liminality, he aches under the weight of its formlessness. Unaware of his mother's identity, he feels from childhood the mark of being a cultural Other. "His own face in the glass had for many years been associated for him with thoughts of some one whom he must be like-one about whose character and lot he continually wondered, and never dared to ask" (165). He pathetically asks Sir Hugo growing up, "What do you want me to be, sir?" (154). Instead of appreciating the physical allure of having this flexibility of identity, he desperately wishes to belong to a community.

Somehow Daniel behaves with total virtue throughout his journey of self-discovery. A liminal identity does not lead to erratic behavior; rather he never fails to operate with both startling decency and strong romantic intentions. He comes to Gwendolen's aid, despite her difficult nature, and provides a sympathetic ear as she lives with regret over her marriage to Grandcourt. He can simultaneously exhibit both the virtues of the best of manhood and the strong sexual interest Victorian society associates with the worst of manhood. He does all this with the possession of an unmistakable beauty, and all Gwendolen appears to be conscious of is the nature of his difference, as an alternative to the pain inherent in traditional relations with men. She

wonders:

Had he some way of looking at things which might be a new footing for her-an inward safeguard against possible events which she dreaded as stored-up retribution? It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness (380).

This passage leaves unclear what precisely, besides sensitivity, Daniel provides for Gwendolen. After the gallant business with the handkerchief, he does little for the woman besides listen. For a woman who has wished to penetrate and dominate rather than be submissive, Daniel is proof of the flexibility of gender. Here is a man who is effeminate and sensitive, yet also possesses a masculine charm.

He also interacts with Gwendolen out of an unmistakable sexual interest. Just after Grandcourt has forced his wife to wear the diamonds, here, as in *Middlemarch*, a mark of submissive femininity, she thinks back to the enormous pleasure she once found in entrancing men. “The admiring male, rashly adjusting the expression of his features and the turn of his conversation to her supposed tastes, had always been an absurd object to her, and at present seemed rather detestable” (379-380). No longer driven by her own materialism, Gwendolen fails to understand Daniel, like the other men, adjusts himself for her. She is a desirable woman in need, and so he happily plays rescuer.

Gwendolen’s interest in Daniel comes from what she sees as his Otherness, although in reality it is more his liminality, the fact that he represents both the world she

knows and a more alluring world that she does not. Daniel's desire for Gwendolen is equally liminal. Superficially Daniel's choice between Gwendolen and Mirah seem binary by nature, between his Victorian and Jewish selves. Modern critics tend to cast his desire for Gwendolen, as well as his sexuality as a whole, in more of a light of Otherness. Carroll goes so far as to use Daniel's humming from Rossini's opera *Otello* as a way to frame the relationship as a retelling of Shakespeare's *Othello*, with Daniel and Gwendolen acting out the roles of the Moor and Desdemona. "Like Othello, Deronda is a powerful and virile male who nonetheless rigorously retracts his own desire even as, during the novel's handkerchief scene, he sends Gwendolen an intimate token suggestive of a sexual liaison" (Carroll 115). Carroll provocatively points out the paradoxical nature of the relationship, but again she does not see the Victorian nature of Daniel's desire and anxiety. Othello is not a thoroughly liminal figure; his Venetian pretense is stripped away too easily. In *Daniel Deronda* the handkerchief seems emblematic of Victorian sexual relations, masculine, penetrative yet also curiously fearful in a way not seen in Shakespeare. Daniel, like Grandcourt, fears Gwendolen means to make a fool of him (380). Daniel's anxiety about his sexuality also extends to Mirah and how his taking care of her might appear (171-172). Daniel is a sexually potent figure, but his desire, as well as his restraint, comes from his English upbringing. There is a sexual awareness even in the Puritanism that readers find frustrating.

If, as I suggest, Daniel's Otherness provides his perceived innocence, then that is all Gwendolen notices. She fails to see the duality of his behavior, even as he guards her reputation. All she sees is "his usual directness of gaze-a large-eyed gravity, innocent of any intention. His eyes had a peculiarity which has drawn many men into trouble; they

were of a dark yet mild intensity, which seemed to express a special interest in every one on whom he fixed them” (290). The darkness of his beauty takes him apart from the familiarity of the world Gwendolen knows, and also its taint. It also makes him, because he is queerly at a remove from ordinary cultural structure, vulnerable to be taken advantage of. “In mendicant fashion, we make the goodness of others a reason for exorbitant demands on them. That sort of effect was penetrating Gwendolen” (290). The line seems at first to be a simple statement on the proclivity of people to take advantage of the best of us, but there again appears the word “penetrate.” Because of the goodness of Daniel’s difference, Gwendolen projects her own need for a virtuous male figure onto a young man who, because of his liminality, is rather a blank slate.

Daniel provides comfort for Gwendolen, and through her interactions with him she is able to reject, rather than attempt to conquer, the culture into which she has been born. At the same time, he causes her enormous pain as she practically quivers with desire for him. A woman who wishes to dominate, who seems incapable of ever worshipping anything or anyone, completely submits herself to Daniel despite his frankly bland personality. She admits that she has lived only for herself, and he tells her to begin to live for others. ““Feeling what it is to have spoiled one’s life may well make us long to save other lives from being spoiled”” (399). He preaches a gospel of living that includes a masochism that seems more in line with the ideals of Dorothea than what Gwendolen actually needs. ““I suppose our keen feeling for ourselves might end in giving us a keen feeling for others, if when we are suffering acutely, we were to consider that others go through the same sharp experience. That is a sort of remorse before commission”” (399). This seems rather unhelpful. Daniel, because of his difference, feels alienated from

society. Despite being a product of the pain of living in this society, his remedy is one common to Victorian culture, education through suffering. His comments to Gwendolen seem unhelpful; he is trying to turn a self-serving woman into an incarnation of Dorothea.

Despite her narcissism, Gwendolen is portrayed throughout the novel in a more forgiving manner than judgmental Dorothea. Her efforts to assume the role of masculine sadist are decidedly naive, but feminist critic Dorothea Barrett interprets Eliot's depiction as essentially generous. "The gentleness of the narrator's detraction, the affection behind her irony, betray an intellectual breakthrough...George Eliot has overcome the last vestiges of her early Christianity" (Barrett 159). Barrett casts the novel as a promotion of Eliot's "positivist religion of humanity" in which "the object of worship was human, but worship of the truly human requires full understanding and acceptance of both the good and bad elements of human personality" (Barrett 159). The concept is an admirable and enlightened one, and it may very well be a concept Eliot wishes to convey in the novels. However, Barrett is wrong to believe the novel ends with Daniel and eventually Gwendolen having this viewpoint. It is too harsh to see Daniel's treatment of Gwendolen as condescending, since he so fervently believes in the self-sacrifice he preaches. However, his ideals, expressed with an "indignant severity," cause a strong female heroine to lose her own sense of self-worth and source of strength.

Gwendolen of course does not take this perspective. She has become so entranced with Daniel that she eagerly disavows her admittedly misguided attempts at self-preservation. She fawns over Daniel. "'But you have not wronged any one, or spoiled their lives,' said Gwendolen, hastily. 'It is only others who have wronged *you*.'" Daniel carries a great amount of unearned guilt, but such a blandly admirable figure does not

deserve the level of devotion Gwendolen bestows on him. She fawningly tells him, ““But you were right- I *am* selfish. I have never thought much of any one’s feelings, except my mother’s.”” She glosses over her love for her mother, one of the nuances of her character, to rush to a confession of her own failings.

Daniel, despite his inner ambivalence, sounds like Dorothea as he paternally urges Gwendolen to be more serious. ““Some real knowledge would give you an interest in the world beyond the small drama of personal desires.”” Daniel, due to his feelings of rootlessness, is himself not completely assured of his advice’s merit, but Gwendolen eats this up, “looking startled and thrilled as by an electric shock” (399). Through her obedient ““I will try. I will think,”” Daniel becomes himself more assured of his rightness. Piously he says, ““Take the present suffering as a painful letting in of light”” (400). He sounds like St. Theresa, but his moralizing makes him more desirable.

Of course Daniel turns to a life lived for others with his eventual embrace of his Jewish heritage, connoted in all the descriptions of his dark appearance but only fully enunciated when he begins to emotionally identify with Jewish people’s plight as he becomes increasingly entranced with Mirah and Mordecai. At work in this view is again the spiritual impulse, the desire to submit to something larger than oneself. Daniel vaguely defines this larger goal as helping others, rather than subjection to an absent God. Still, he chooses a life of self-sacrifice, a choice that seems less iconoclastic than a life devoted to Zionist activism might suggest. It proves to be the marginalization of the Jewish people that makes *Daniel Deronda*’s ending an ostensibly admirable one, an ending which entails a move to the “warm, regenerative East” (Carroll 136). It also, as I will later address, shows the dark elements of his inescapable indeterminacy.

Both Gwendolen and Dorothea “let in the light,” and its slanted nature makes it far preferable to the sterility of traditional Victorianism. Pain from and for other living, breathing humans and their messy emotions holds the capacity for reciprocation. Because of their interactions with men who are free from the constraints of normalized, Christian society, these women are able to at least partially escape the bounds of the culture into which they have been born. Still, they suffer from their desire for these men, and that disturbing truth brings me back to Lacan’s cultural concept of the Other. These elusively handsome men inspire something resembling *jouissance*, desire at its most overpowering, which eventually leads to death (Lacan 199). As Crockett writes, “*Jouissance* is certainly sexual or libidinal in nature, but it is also destructive and ultimately self-destructive passion. This extremity of desire in its destructive capacity evokes horror because it is unwilling to compromise or negotiate its drive for satisfaction” (Crockett 83). From this, the liminality of Daniel and Will restrains the females from self-destruction. Because of this liminality, these women are able to function in society, although at its margins.

At the same time, Eliot provocatively inverts this idea by attributing a kind of innocence to the difference which inspires these fervent female desires. These objects of desire promote stronger, more humanist feelings in these women, and show them the capacity for an individualism outside of traditional gender roles. It is the mediation that comes from their liminality, from that foot planted firmly on Victorian soil, which causes them suffering. Realistically and bleakly, Eliot portrays how the mark of Victorianism proves inescapable for characters born in its culture.

Chapter Three

Liminality's Discontents

Nietzsche derisively called George Eliot “a little moralistic female” who tried to compensate for her secularism with humanistic morality. He said of her “fanatical” type, “They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality” (Nietzsche 515). Critics like Bernard Paris, in *Experiments in Life*, are more complimentary but say essentially the same thing. Eliot preaches religion without God, a life lived in devotion to others. These types of arguments always involve the real life of Marian Evans, a life I have been reluctant to discuss previously. A one-time religious zealot who grew apart from her faith as she read philosophers like Spinoza, Evans nonetheless happily devoted herself to her already married partner, George Henry Lewes. She signed her letters as Marian Lewes and took a close role in the raising of Lewes' children. She declined to support John Stuart Mill's amendment to the suffrage bill of 1867, advocating “sublime resignation” on the part of women (Himmelfarb 5-6). Eliot had, despite many very subversive views, a traditional view of a woman's place.

Regardless of Eliot's personal views, her last two texts add curious nuances to the idea of an honorable, quietly unselfish life. Dorothea, after carrying vaguely religious ambitions of contributing to the world's knowledge, ends *Middlemarch* as a housewife. Indeed, all the characters in that novel fail to achieve their grand ideals, in a demonstration of the disappointing realism that jaded modern readers so value in Eliot. Yet, in her final novel, she gives Daniel an impossibly romantic ending as he and Mirah sweep off away from the constraints of Victorianism to live a life of Zionist activism.

Somehow, this ending, despite its religious bent, stands as a happy one. It represents an act of iconoclasm, a stand against the moral bankruptcy of men like Grandcourt. Yet Gwendolen, who seems all too eager to both follow Daniel and stand against the culture she has sought to thrive in, has no part in this ending. She's left on the shores of Britain, reassuring Daniel that he has improved her with his moralizing.

What makes the ending of *Daniel Deronda* striking is its simultaneous sameness and difference in relation to *Middlemarch*'s crushingly ambivalent ending. After spending the bulk of that novel directing her sexual energies towards an absent God, which gives them a masturbatory quality, Dorothea badly desires Will's unusual flesh. When Will leaves Middlemarch in a cloud of scandal, she feels an odd triumph in knowing she was right about the essential innocence of Will's difference, manifested in his lack of care for the appearance of his relationship with Rosamond Lydgate. After he angrily leaves Dorothea's home, "She could think of him unrestrainedly. At that moment the parting was easy to bear: the first sense of loving and being loved excluded sorrow." The object of her love reciprocates; the certainty of this mitigates the probability that they may never be together:

The joy was not the less-perhaps it was the more complete just then-because of the irrevocable parting; for there was no reproach, no contemptuous wonder to imagine in any eye or from any lips. He had acted so as to defy reproach, and make wonder respectful (392-393).

Will's allure comes from a queer corporeality that cannot be fully articulated, but he also carries with him the mark of Victorianism. In his absence, the mundane aspects of his

liminality are absent. He represents freedom from the constraints of gender sexuality, and he is more than receptive to Dorothea's love.

Casaubon's will constrains Dorothea and prevents her from being with Will, yet it causes this joy of parting. Dorothea is at her most assertive and clear-headed at this point in the novel as she extricates Lydgate from the jaws of ruin. When he desperately confides in her, she famously says "I cannot bear to rest in this as unchangeable...There is no sorrow I have thought more about than that-to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail" (471). A lament for the impossibility of ideals, the statement also speaks to the unfairness of a culture in which humans doom themselves to failure through adherence to restrictive mores. Still, instead of resignation, there is strength in her refusal to rest any longer in this order. Will has changeability, that slipperiness which defies the ordinary bounds of gender and rejects the mores which dictate provincial life. This effect has equipped Dorothea with curious powers of empathy, feelings that transcend mere sympathy because of its sexual knowledge. Lydgate hints at his difficulties with Rosamond, and Dorothea thinks about "how well she knew that there might be invisible barriers to speech between husband and wife. This was a point on which even sympathy might make a wound" (473). Wound holds vaginal connotations, and the act of making a wound through empathy seems penetrative as well painful. A young woman who has been brutally self-involved can now feel an implicitly sexual intimacy with another miserable human being. Like a good work of art, she can enter a person and resonate with his experience and suffering.

Part of her still wishes to do something vaguely transcendent, "to buy land with and found a village which should be a school of industry," but she acknowledges that the

“risk would be too great” (472). What she actually does seems more meaningful. Lydgate is in front of her; he is suffering and it is in her power to alleviate the pain. At the same time, he passes through it. His liminality empowers Dorothea to make the unusual choice to relieve Lydgate’s debt to Bulstrode. The grand Christian altruist helps a scientist, a non-believer, in need, because she can. It is an unseemly act for a woman, and it is unquestionably Dorothea’s finest moment.

Despite his progressivism, Lydgate’s consciously clinical perspective inhibits his powers of empathy. After Dorothea’s selfless act, he thinks of her with a religious fervor:

This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary. She evidently thinks nothing of her own future, and would pledge away half her income at once, as if she wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her” (474).

His opinion fails to appreciate the humility inherent in this small act of goodness, as well as resentment toward her higher moral position. Dorothea probably could pledge away half her income, yet she does not. Rather than create a disparity with the beneficiaries, as a higher and non-sexual being like the Virgin Mary would, Dorothea has created a close intimacy with the way she has taken full appreciation of Lydgate’s struggle. He fails to appreciate this. Perhaps this is due to his enslavement to his wife Rosamond.

Consummately coquettish, she possesses superficially ideal qualities which mask an almost inhuman selfishness. After seeing the false exterior of his ideal Victorian woman, the increasingly nihilistic doctor is blind to a truer, non-Victorian unselfishness.

The preening lady's charms also bring out Will's Englishness. His understandable attraction to her leads Dorothea to disavow his sexual power. "The fire of Dorothea's anger was not easily spent, and it flamed out in fitful returns of spurning reproach. Why had he come obtruding his life into hers, her that might have been whole enough without him?" (485). Dorothea's fury has a sexual edge as she resents the way Will has penetrated her life. His Otherness has awakened her in a similar way to the "gigantic Broken revelations" thrust upon her in Rome, enabling her to behave with this eroticized empathy. At the same time, he operates with a Victorian mindset that draws him to the appalling Rosamond. In this way, Will fails to live up to what he represents.

Dorothea loves this man anyway. She tells herself "If I love him too much it is because he has been used so ill" and he has been treated badly because of his difference. He also has been decidedly erratic, uneasily mediating between the innocence of his Otherness and the darker proclivities of his Englishness. Still, his transcendent grace and beauty, as well as his earnestness, enrapture her. "She looked as if there was a spell upon her, keeping her motionless and hindering her from unclasping her hands, while some intense, grave yearning was imprisoned within her eyes" (497). There is a magic to Will; his origins provide an alternative outside of the everyday world. The thunder that spurs the couple to their embrace gives the relationship its supernatural air.

Eliot could have ended the plot line there, yet she instead shows the crushing reality of this marriage. The romantic edge of Dorothea's devotion has all but disappeared in the Finale. Will becomes a Reformer, out of an "ardor" that resembles Dorothea's at the beginning of the novel. He ends the novel a member of the establishment, trying to enact change but motivated by vague Christian ideals. His wife

has deserved better, but Dorothea “could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help” (513). Her powers of sympathy turn to mundane domestic subservience as Will’s Otherness vanishes. Dorothea once again has taken on the Victorian role of womanhood, but she is happy. Her apparent satisfaction with blind devotion to her husband feeds the novel’s final ambivalence. The inescapable taint of Victorian morality, with its subjugation, accompanies Will’s liminality.

Commenting on Virginia Woolf’s complaint about the inadequacy of male figures in Eliot’s novels, Dorothea Barrett writes, “George Eliot never intended to create fit mates” (Barrett 22). I agree with her view that Eliot does not seem to believe in the existence of fit mates, but she introduces two males who seem too good to be true, and are. These figures possess a paradoxical Otherness in their corporeality, so they should be able to pick up Dorothea and Gwendolen from their own self-imprisonment in a Victorian mindset. Yet neither couple fully escapes. The one hope appears to be a life lived on the margins of mainstream culture, and that is what leads Eliot to explore Judaism in her final novel. She does not champion or even fully articulate its religious values. As queer theorist Jacob Press notices, “Although it is famous for its imagination of a proto-Zionism, the actual articulation of these politics is utterly marginalized. There are only three passages in nine hundred pages of text that address themselves explicitly to the question of Jewish nationalism” (Press 310). She rather appropriates the religion and the plight of its practitioners as a mode of articulating the possibilities of a life lived outside of Victorianism.

When ambivalent Daniel Deronda first meets Mordecai, the “visionary” cuts an

unimpressive, even grotesque figure. “A man in threadbare clothing, whose age was difficult to guess—from the dead yellowish flatness of the flesh” (337). This consumptive, unwashed and zealous, fits every Victorian caricature of Judaism. He represents an Otherness created by Christian society, and even in the liminal Daniel he inspires an English anxiety. He carries with him a disdain for traditional English society, choosing to live on its margins. He works to create an entire world of Otherness by nation-building for his rootless and oppressed people. This life is painful:

For many winters, while he had been conscious of an ebbing physical life, and a widening spiritual loneliness, all his passionate desire had concentrated itself in the yearning for some young ear into which he could pour his mind as a testament, some soul kindred enough to accept the spiritual product of his own brief, painful life, as a mission to be executed”(417).

Suddenly Daniel comes into his life. Daniel is a liminal figure who, despite his ambivalence, inhabits Victorian society with an assurance that seems foreign to Mordecai. The visionary searches “for a possibility which became more and more a distinct conception. Such directness as it had at first was reached by a method of contrast: he wanted to find a man who differed from himself” (417-418). It becomes clear that “himself” could refer as much to Daniel’s self as Mordecai’s. “He imagined a man who would have all the elements necessary for sympathy with him, but in an embodiment unlike his own: he must be a Jew, intellectually cultured, morally fervid—in all this nature ready to be plished from Mordecai’s” (418). Press says that “Mordecai has a thing for high class types,” (Press 307) but Mordecai is attracted more to Daniel’s mass of

contradictions. He embodies both the Victorianism necessary to enact change and the mark of difference. Society has forced Mordecai into a marginalized role; Daniel stands above all roles as his appearance and background defy definition. He is exactly what the visionary wants.

Mordecai is a religious zealot. He is set apart from Christianity more from his powers of “sympathy” than his suicidal devotion to Zionism. Like Dorothea, he finds the freedom from real-world constraints in the art he views in museums. He sometimes looks at “pictures as well as men, and in a vacant hour he had sometimes lingered in the National Gallery in search of paintings which might feed his hopefulness with grave and noble types of the human form” (418). He sees his ideal in the ebb and flow of gender roles portrayed in art. Press convincingly disinters the homoeroticism inherent in Mordecai’s conception of a dreamboat successor. The art holds what Press calls “heroic constructions of the national male body, a temple of British masculinity at which the virtually disembodied Jew worships. He views the Other in silent awe; the Other views him with detached curiosity” (Press 308). Mordecai is unmistakably drawn to male forms, but Press’ religious language seems inappropriate. Still a young man, the Jew seeks less for a disciple than a partner.

In fact, despite his provocative insights, Press inserts a certain degree of cynicism and condescension in his view of the relationship as Mordecai wins over Daniel. “Mordecai wants to-spiritually-penetrate a young man. He is looking for nothing except an aesthetically appropriate receptacle into which to release himself.” Referencing all the characters who rely on Daniel, Press writes that Daniel “longs to be dominated; Mordecai is looking for someone to dominate. It is a match made in heaven” (Press 309). He seeks

to penetrate, but it more closely resembles a mutual sexual bond, the type of intimacy implied by Dorothea's empathy for Lydgate. "Sympathy" means here more than feeling for someone; it means feeling with someone, joint mutual feeling borne from being from the same society.

The brotherhood of Judaism in *Daniel Deronda* actually holds an equality in its male bonds that seems absent from the traditional power dynamics of relationships between men. As David Toise points out, Sir Hugo, the essential aristocratic Victorian male, puts an emphasis on homosocial bonds as he champions male friendship and advises Daniel to avoid a flirtation with Gwendolen. His relationship with Daniel is benevolent but based on control:

He had been a bachelor till he was five-and-forty, had always been regarded as a fascinating man of elegant tastes; what could be more natural, even according to the index of language, than that he should have a beautiful boy like the little Deronda to take care of? (154).

The natural thing in this society is for this type of relationship between men, with one controlling and instructing a younger one. The concept of a grown man "taking care" of a boy carries connotations of pederasty, and that buried power dynamic is established in Victorian society, ruled by men educated in an instructional mode based on classical Greek dialogues. "For Sir Hugo, the relationship between himself and Deronda reflects a homoeroticism founded on one man's patronage of a less powerful one" that was common in patriarchal institutions (Toise 132).

Daniel progresses from this established model, with its classical origins, to a

more equivocal type of homoeroticism. Mordecai certainly wishes to teach Daniel about Judaism and the plight of its people, but he searches less for a disciple than a partner to share his pain and continue his journey for him. In turn, Daniel, torn between the pull of his Otherness and his devotion to the traditional masculinity embodied by Sir Hugo, finds in the brotherhood of Judaism the perfect way to mediate his own liminality. Culturally, Judaism is a good fit for a marginal figure. It is, in Victorian society, autonomous yet rootless, straddling both ancient mysticism and the culture of oppressive modern Christianity.

After learning the particulars of the Zionist cause and being exposed to Mordecai's influence, Daniel begins to realize his place. To an intermediate figure such as Daniel, the elusiveness of his own identity carries no name and no home along with its freedom from societal constraints. Mordecai gives Daniel a name and a sense of destiny. The shared pain of the "new psalms of exile" that the visionary discusses come with a collective power of empathy. When Daniel says, "I feel with you-I feel strongly with you," Mordecai responds:

That is not enough... You must be not only a hand to me, but a soul-believing my belief-being moved by my reasons-hoping my hope-seeing the vision I point to-beholding a glory where I behold it!" - Mordecai had taken a step nearer as he spoke, and now laid his hand on Deronda's arm with a tight grasp; his face little more than a foot off had something like a pale flame in it (442).

This is less the language of penetration and dominance than complete union. Mere sympathy, Daniel's appreciation of the plight of the Jews, proves insufficient. Mordecai

speaks with a fire, again connoting a sexual fervor. The use of his hand gives a sexual edge to the language of discipleship, but he wants Daniel to be more than one to stroke his autoerotic energies. He wants Daniel to live in a kind of union with him, a shared relationship that will transcend the depressing realities of Victorian life.

Both men, with their marks of the Other, have the capability to forge such a bond through Judaism. After Daniel attends the meeting of “The Philosophers,” his envelopment into the marginalized world of Judaism reaches its climax when Mordecai initiates him into what Press describes as a marriage. “In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished” (477). When he lies on his deathbed, Mordecai refers to their relationship as a “willing marriage which melts soul into soul” (657). The visionary considers Daniel his equal; he has too much faith in Daniel’s ability to effect change to confirm Press’ assertion that Daniel is a mere “receptacle.”

Press genders the relationship and Judaism in the novel itself as specifically masculine. He draws this assumption from the alluded to homoeroticism of Mordecai’s lusts, and admittedly there are no women in The Philosopher’s meeting. However, women are capable of such erotic empathy, as Dorothea’s shining moment with Lydgate shows, and Daniel ends in the novel in a heterosexual bond with Mirah as well as his spiritual bond with the dead Mordecai. As Toise points out, “the last lines of the book describe not so much the happy couple as the happy couple with Mordecai between them” (Toise 144). Both Toise and Press see the relationship of the trio as an instance of

homosocial bonds overpowering heterosexual marriage, but this relationship, in its transcendence of the bounds of Victorianism, has room for both the homo and heteroerotic. There is tremendous pain in this religion, but there is freedom here.

“And Gwendolen? -She was thinking of Deronda much more than he was thinking of her,” (482) the narrator says darkly after Daniel’s Zionist awakening. Indeed, Gwendolen’s overpowering desire for this paragon seems to leave her a neglected and downcast character throughout the novel’s final portion. Gwendolen seems all too ready, both consciously and unconsciously, to melt into the kind of union Daniel and Mordecai have together. She does not fully understand the nature of Daniel’s difference but wants him to teach her. “She wondered what books he would tell her to take up to her own room, and recalled the famous writers that she had either not looked into or had found the most unreadable.” Gwendolen thinks of canonical thinkers like Locke and Descartes as what Daniel would read, “knowing, as a clever young lady of education, that these authors, were ornaments of mankind, feeling sure that Deronda had read them” so that she “might get to a point closer to his level” (483). She imagines him reading progressive logical thinkers, not fully realizing that those writers could never articulate the Otherness Daniel possesses. Still, a woman who believed she had everything figured out has become aware of the limits to her knowledge. She envisions the change Daniel would bring in the forms of books, a medium with which her real-world mind can connect. Still, she desires to intimately share in Daniel’s knowledge, “to take it up to her own room.” She seems a “soul kindred enough to accept the spiritual product” of Mordecai. Despite bearing no marks of difference, she seems aching ready for the type of intimacy Daniel and Mordecai share, and to leave the society she knows behind. Despite her jealous

condescension towards Mirah, she “had wanted to be a struggling artist herself” (495). She seems more than willing to live on the margins like the Jewish girl if it means escape from her situation.

So then, why does Gwendolen get left to make her own way in constrictive Victorian society when she is ripe for plucking away into this elusive Otherness? The easy answer is her essentially English womanhood. Supposedly Daniel is the wise one when he disbelieves Gwendolen’s protest that ““What difference need that have made?”” (703). Her prejudice and spoiled insular views are insurmountable. Yet she seems more than ready to take up the cause. ““What are you going to do?’ she asked, at last, very timidly. ‘Can I understand the ideas, or am I too ignorant?’” (704). Daniel simply ignores the plea as he piously rambles about his goals. When Gwendolen cries that ““I should be forsaken. I have been a cruel woman. And I am forsaken.”” Daniel finally feels sympathy for her pain. “She was the victim of his happiness” (706). However, his realization of his heritage precludes him from even attempting to feel her pain. He assumes from the start that “her ideas and his acted like a difference of native language” (703). After spending the entire novel representing freedom from societal constraints, he seems suddenly unable to understand someone with a different background from his own.

I think Daniel’s liminality is again at work in his choice to leave Gwendolen behind. Gwendolen, in her strength and caginess, wishes to subvert the Victorian values that have always held a certain pull for Daniel’s psyche. Her contempt for her husband and her role as gracious wife make him ill at ease, even though she is more than willing to submit to his will. Gwendolen’s proto-feminism endures to the end. It takes a certain gall even to ask a man to take her with him to the East. Her supposed selfishness and

insensitivity really show her misplacement in the world of the Victorian woman, so a man with one foot still planted in Victorian values needs to leave her behind.

He instead takes a paradoxically Victorian wife with him. Mirah, like Daniel himself, has a dark complexion that brings connotations of Otherness. When Daniel first sees her, she gives him a look resembling “something like that of a fawn or other gentle animal before it turns to run away” (228). She has all the aching vulnerability of the Victorian woman, and she needs a man’s influence to restore her natural state with “cheerfulness, vivacity, and powers of endurance” that Showalter references. She is no hysteric; she really just needs a man to protect her from the sexual proclivities of men like the wealthy count. Daniel, in turn, is “full of fears about the issue of the adventure which had brought on him a responsibility all the heavier for the strong and agitating impression this childlike creature had made on him” (181), and that bars spoiling her with sexual contact.

What makes her ostensibly well suited to Daniel is the physical difference that goes hand in hand with her innocence. She possesses a dark complexion that brings connotations of Otherness. Referencing Mab’s impression of the young woman, Carroll writes, “While she is figured as tiny and childlike, Mirah is also compared with the voluptuous Queen Budoor of *The Thousand and One Nights*, whose lush body and capacity for desire are described at length in the tale to which Eliot alludes” (Carroll 134-135). Carroll astutely points out that Mirah, despite her insufferable dullness, continues a trope in literature of the Jewish woman as an object of desire. Carroll makes the case that this adds nuance to the portrayal, but the fear that Daniel and Mirah herself share over her sexual attractiveness seems at odds with the innocence associated with Daniel’s

Otherness. Daniel's exoticism is freeing and has a kind of innocence; Mirah's dark allure needs to be suppressed in favor of her more ideal characteristics of chastity and morality. Her own liminality is treated with prudishness, with her childlike demeanor emphasized.

Her perpetual fragility never disappears throughout the novel. As Daniel leaves with her, his "love for Mirah was strongly imbued with that blessed protectiveness. Even with infantine feet she had begun to tread among thorns; and the first time he had beheld her face it had seemed to him the girlish image of despair." Now the woman has a protector, a protector Gwendolen, despite her misery, can function without. Mirah is now "glowing like a dark-tipped yet delicate ivory-tinted flower in the warm sunlight of content, thinking of any possible grief as part of that life with Deronda which she could call by no other name than good" (708). The danger to the sensitive female is gone, and a man will provide her happiness.

Toise articulates this best when he says, "Mirah Lampidoth embodies mid-Victorian female sentimentality, an emotionally suffused self-denial" (Toise 129). She looks like Daniel, and like Daniel she is a liminal figure, every inch the embodiment of Victorian values in her behavior despite her marks of difference. Take this as a contrast to Gwendolen, a woman almost insanely ready to throw herself into the Other, to remove herself from the realm of Christian virtue. Although this is maddening to readers, it is no wonder Daniel chooses Mirah. Paradoxically, Mirah reaffirms that Daniel never will fully escape the restrictive bounds of Victorianism. His choice of a figure described in childlike terms throughout the novel instead of a vibrant desirous woman also reveals the queerness inherent in Victorian relations. Our hero not only ends with a lesser partner; *Daniel Deronda* concludes with something resembling child love.

This view of the novels' endings is certainly gloomy. The elusive liminality of two desirable men fails to free women to pursue their individual desires. Eliot does not resolve the unfulfilling desires experienced by her two heroines. Their sexuality no longer modulates to conform to a Victorian society that required women to be tools of procreation while denying their own need to express themselves sexually and otherwise. But are they better off? Dorothea serves as the smiling political wife, becoming exactly the "complement" to her husband that Showalter referenced. Gwendolen does not even get to be a complement. Left by Daniel with vague notions of self-sacrifice, readers never get to see her find erotic or emotional equilibrium through an empathetic understanding of another. She is last seen picking up the shards of her own life, although there is a chance she will indeed be stronger, and not in the altruistic way Daniel envisions. Whatever the author's intention, Eliot's novels show the impossibility, even in the presence of Otherness, of escaping a society in which you are raised. These characters seem predestined to adhere to the ideas set forth in Victorian society. Not even those who possess unconscious marks of difference can fully escape.

Although I have looked at Victorian barriers to expression of individualistic sexuality, this project reaffirms the view of Eliot's two final novels as pessimistic condemnations of Victorian society. Although Eliot was a fierce advocate for political and social reform, these novels contain malaise and resignation to the overpowering power of Victorian influence. However she felt about her own life and partnership, the texts of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* show the limits of personal will, and the impossibility of ever fully expressing oneself as an individual totally removed from society.

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