A generation before Freud, George Eliot taught the unhappy truth to her contemporaries that character is fate. If character is fate, then in a harsh sense there can be no accidents. Personalities suffer accidents; characters endure fate. George Eliot herself is a grand instance of the pattern she created for all of her personages; her own character eminently proved to be her fate. If we seek major personalities among the great novelists, we find many competitors: Balzac, Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James, even the enigmatic Conrad. By general agreement, the supreme example of a moral character would be George Eliot. She has a nearly unique spiritual authority, best characterized by the English critic Walter Allen about twenty years ago: 

George Eliot is the first novelist in the world in some things, and they are the things that come within the scope of her moral interpretation of life. Circumscribed though it was, it was certainly not narrow; nor did she ever forget the difficulty attendant upon the moral life and the complexity that goes to its making. 

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All seven novels by George Eliot were immensely popular in her own lifetime. Today there is common consent that The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Middlemarch (1871–1872) are as vital as they were more than a century ago. Adam Bede (1859) is respected but not widely read or studied, while Romola (1862–1863) is rightly forgotten. Felix Holt, the Radical (1866) retains some current interest, but less perhaps than Adam Bede. Silas Marner (1861) remains extraordinary to read and probably is undervalued by most critics. Rereading it after decades away from it, I find astonishing mythological power throughout its apparently serene pastoralism.

The novel by George Eliot that presents the greatest difficulty is of course Daniel Deronda (1876), which has divided its readers and will go on confusing them. Dr. Leavis and others proposed the radical solution of quarrying a new novel, Gwendolyn Harleth, out of the book, thus creating an achievement for Eliot not unlike the Emma or Persuasion of Jane Austen. In this drastic operation, the hero, Daniel Deronda himself, was to be all but discarded, primarily on the grounds that his endless nobility was wearisome. Deronda is an incipient Zionist leader who is nine tenths a prig and only one tenth a passionate idealist. He simply

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is not a male Dorothea Brooke, as his scenes with Gwendolyn Harleth invariably show. She vaults off the page; he lacks personality, or else possesses so much character that he sinks with it, and in a few places into veritable bathos.

And yet, as many critics keep remarking, he is not quite so easily discarded, because the remarkable Gwendolyn is convincingly in love with him and also because the even more remarkable George Eliot is in love with him also. Her portrait of George Henry Lewes, her common-law husband, as Will Ladislaw in Middlemarch does not persuade us that he is a wholly fit partner, whether for George Eliot or for Dorothea Brooke. Deronda sometimes makes me think of a Jewish Caspar Goodwood, Isabel Archer’s suitor, just as Gwendolyn seems halfway between Isabel Archer and Elizabeth Bennet. Henry James, in his equivocal “Daniel Deronda: A Conversation” (1876), neatly gives his “Theodora” a positive judgment of Deronda, “Pulcheria” a rather more pungent negative one, and the judicious “Constantius” an ambiguous balance between the two:

**Theodora.** And the advice he gives Gwendolyn, the things he says to her, they are the very essence of wisdom, of warm human wisdom, knowing life and feeling it. “Keep your fear as a safeguard, it may make consequences passionately present to you.” What can be better than that?

**Pulcheria.** Nothing, perhaps. But what can be drearier than a novel in which the function of the hero — young, handsome, and brilliant — is to give didactic advice, in a proverbial form, to the young, beautiful, and brilliant heroine?

**Constantius.** That is not putting it quite fairly. The function of Deronda is to make Gwendolyn fall in love with him....

Constantius adds, rather mordantly: “Poor Gwendolyn’s falling in love with Deronda is part of her own luckless history, not of his.”

The implied view of Deronda here is not too far from that of Robert Louis Stevenson, for whom the visionary Zionist was “the Prince of Prigs.” Against all this must be set the reaction of George Eliot herself, dismissing “the laudation of readers who cut the book into scraps and talk of nothing in it but Gwendolyn. I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there.” We can test this relatedness in one of the novel’s great moments, when Gwendolyn is compelled to recognize a rejection that she legitimately cannot be expected to understand:

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolyn’s small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. All the troubles of her wifehood and widowhood had still left her with the implicit impression which had accompanied her from childhood, that whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her, and it was because of this that no personal jealousy had been roused in her in relation to Deronda: she could not spontaneously think of him as rightfully belonging to others more than to her. But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy—something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation.

Perhaps this is George Eliot’s greatest power: to represent the falling away of a not ignoble self-centeredness as an involuntary movement toward the terror of a solitude that knows its loneliness, yet comforts itself by being free. Gwendolyn after all is losing not only her potential lover, but her virtual superego, though a superego very different from the Freudian model. The Freudian superego demands that the hapless ego surrender its aggressiveness, and then continues to torment the ego for being too aggressive still. But Deronda is the gravest and most gentlemanly of

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This is the subtle surmise of Martin Price in his *Forms of Life*, a study of “Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel.” Price reads Gwendolyn as a character terrorized by her own empty strength of will, oppressed by the potential solitude to which her will may convey her. Ironically, that fear of the sublime attracts its own doom in the sadistic Grandcourt, who marries Gwendolyn, certainly the most dreadful of all mismatches even in George Eliot. Her strength blocked, her will thwarted, Gwendolyn seems condemned to perpetual death in life, until George Eliot rescues her heroine by one of her characteristic drownings, thus relieving Gwendolyn of her error but depriving the reader of a splendidly hateful object in Grandcourt, who is one of George Eliot’s negative triumphs.

Eliot is masterly in never quite explaining precisely what draws Deronda to Gwendolyn. Absurd high-mindedness aside, it does seem that Deronda needs Gwendolyn’s well-developed sense of self, as Price suggests. Himself a kind of changeling, Deronda needs to enact rescue fantasies, with Gwendolyn taking the place of an absent mother. If that seems too close to Freud’s essay “Family Romances,” and too far from George Eliot’s fiction, then we ought to recall the yearnings of Dorothea Brooke and of Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, and Eliot’s own lifelong yearnings to “rescue” distinguished male intellectuals. Instilling a moral conscience in the charming Gwendolyn may seem a curious training for a future Zionist uplifter, but in George Eliot’s universe it is perhaps an inevitable induction for someone determined to be a prophet of his people’s moral regeneration.

Price sums up Gwendolyn by associating her with Estella in *Great Expectations* and with Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Like them, the even more charming and forceful Gwendolyn must be reduced in scope and intensity in order to become a better person, or perhaps only an imperfect solipsist. Price is very much in George Eliot’s mode when he counts and accepts the cost of assigning sublimity to moral energy: “There is a loss of scale as one dwindles to a moral being; yet it is also the emergence of a self from the welter of assertion and impulse that has often provided an impressive substitute.” Something in the reader, something not necessarily daemonic, wants to protest, wants to ask Eliot: “Must there always be a loss in scope? Must one dwindle to a moral being?”

George Eliot herself, in her letters, gives one answer theoretically, and it is consistent with the burden of *Daniel Deronda*, and a very different one pragmatically, since she palpably gains scale even as she gorgeously augments her self as a moral being. Whatever her letters may lack as narrative, or in Ruskinian madness, they continuously teach us the necessity of confronting our own moral evasions and self-disenchantments. Here she is in full strength, writing to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe on October 29, 1876:

As to the Jewish element in “Deronda,” I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is—I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were

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4 Yale University Press, 1983.

5 Price, *Forms of Life*, P. 174
possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religious and moral sentiment. Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called “educated” making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek. To my feeling, this deadness to the history which has prepared half our world for us, this inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own lies very close to the worst kind of irreligion. The best that can be said of it is, that it is a sign of the intellectual narrowness—in plain English, the stupidity, which is still the average mark of our culture.

Yes, I expected more aversion than I have found…. I sum up with the writer of the Book of Maccabees—“if I have done well, and as befits the subject, it is what I desired, but if I have done ill, it is what I could attain unto.”

Confronted by that power of moral earnestness, the critic is properly disarmed. It hardly suffices to murmur that Deronda is the “Prince of Prigs,” or to lament that Gwendolyn’s imaginative force and human charm deserved something better than a dwindling down into moral coherence. George Eliot is too modest in summing up with the barely inspired writer of the Book of Maccabees. She is closer in moral grandeur to the author of Job, and to Tolstoy. Daniel Deronda may be a more vexed creation than The Mill on the Floss or Middlemarch, but it carries their moral authority, biblical and Tolstoyan.

Unfortunately, it could be said against Daniel Deronda that it carries too much moral authority and too little of the persuasive human drama of Middlemarch in particular. Dorothea Brooke does not have the brilliance or vivacity of Gwendolyn Harleth, but at least her passage from the dreadful Dr. Casaubon to Will Ladislaw, the surrogate for George Henry Lewes, has about it the aura of the actual pragmatic choices that human beings are forced to make in their erotic lives. That erotic realism is sadly lacking in Daniel Deronda, which expends George Eliot’s exuberance almost exclusively in the moral sphere. Nevertheless, no one after George Eliot has achieved the peculiar and invaluable synthesis, in Middlemarch, between the moral and aesthetic, a synthesis attempted also, but without success, in Daniel Deronda.

Source:

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6 Selections, Haight, ed., p. 476