

# The Convergence between the Thoughts of George Eliot and Henry James

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## Abstract

This paper aims to have a technical concentration on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in order to form a complex and dynamic interpretation of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The author of this paper intends to show how Eliot's ideas may have been in James's mind during his early writing career, long before writing his novel. This study will technically interpret *Daniel Deronda* to evaluate James's indebtedness to Eliot in a more concrete way. This technical consideration provides a framework for the readers to have a different understanding of James's statement in the preface of the New York edition when he states that his heroine's destiny was unknown to him while writing the novel. The author is confident in his argument that Eliot's novel can provide the readers a framework to criticise heroine's character and destiny.

**Keywords:** egoism, the power of will, *Daniel Deronda*, *The Portrait of a Lady*

## 1. Introduction

In the preface of the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James describes how he came to create his characters. James notes, "I seem to myself to have waked up one morning in possession of them ... it was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own floated into my pen, and all in response to my primary question: "Well, what will she *do*?" (*Portrait*, p. 14). (Note 1) "She" refers to James's heroine, Isabel Archer. According to James, her destiny is the "primary question" of the novel. It seems that the answer of this question was unknown even to James as he let it evolve through his characters stating: "Their answer seemed to be that if I would trust them they would show me; on which, with an urgent appeal to them to make it at least as interesting as they could, I trusted them" (*Portrait*, p. 14). It is underlying argument of this paper that the very framing of *The Portrait of a Lady* is illogical especially when James states that Isabel's destiny was unknown to him and he let it evolve through his character.

A recent critical assumption about the preface of James's novel is Peter Rawlings's *American Theorists of the Novel: Henry James, Lionel Trilling and Wayne C. Booth* (2006). Rawlings states, "James's emphasis is on the boundless array of perspectives available to individuals, on the different impressions each person develops of his or her world, and on the degree to which how we look at the world is a way of shaping it" (p. 84). Rawlings claims that James's statement that he was not aware of Isabel's destiny is irrational. In his article "Vital Illusions in *The Portrait of a Lady*" published in 2008, he highlights James's argument in his landmark essay "The Art of Fiction" for the independence of "character" and "incident." In this article, James believes that the plot of a novel should be subordinated to the importance of its characters. Rawlings argues that the representation of Isabel's experience directly contradicts the New York Edition preface's account of her development, and that it invalidates, whatever James's intentions, the theory he considered for the plot's subordination. He defends his assertion by referencing James's notebook. In his notebook, James states, "The idea of the whole thing is that the poor girl, who has dreamed of freedom and nobleness, who has done, as she believes a generous, natural, clear-sighted thing, finds herself ground in the very mill of the conventional" (p. 15). Considering this statement Rawlings claims that there is "no sense in the actual planning of *The Portrait of a Lady* of a character somehow floating before the author and generating in his mind the action of the novel" (*Vital*, p. 71). Where my approach differs from Rawlings's is in its technical concentration on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in order to form a complex and dynamic interpretation of James's novel. I intend to show how Eliot's ideas may have been in James's mind during his early writing career, long before writing *The Portrait of a Lady*. I will technically

interpret *Daniel Deronda* to evaluate James's indebtedness to Eliot in a more concrete way. This technical consideration provides a framework for the readers to have a different understanding of James's statement in the preface of the New York edition. I am confident in my argument that Eliot's novel can provide us a framework to criticise Isabel's character and destiny. It is work worth doing, for Henry James was critical of Eliot, and the plot, the character establishment and development of his novel parallel and even seem to follow Eliot's themes on morality.

## 2. Analysis

In a collection of letters between William James and his younger brother from July 1876 to February 1877, they speak about George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and are excessive in their praise of the writer for her book which was important enough that they comment on it in numerous correspondence with one another. In a letter on 1 May 1878, Henry writes to William about a meeting with George Eliot: "The great G.E. [George Eliot] herself is both sweet and superior ... I had my turn at sitting beside her & being conversed with in a low, but most harmonious tone ... I have not fault to find with her" (*Complete letters*, p. 113). Here, James shows himself as a man abased when in the company of Eliot. Her writings were significantly impressive and James looks very excited at his "turn at sitting" besides a woman in whom he has great admiration.

In 1864, when James's first piece of fiction, titled *A Tragedy of Error*, was published, Dickens and George Eliot were in full career and Hardy was far from beginning to publish. James's second novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), precedes George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), while his *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) follows it. (Note 2) George Eliot, as Alwyn Berland states, "asserted a more general, more pervasive influence on James than is ordinarily acknowledged" (p. 72). This influence is neither direct nor exclusive, but its consequence creates a significant penetration of her views in James's writing. The works of Eliot do appear to offer more than just an interesting speculative analogy to James in writing *The Portrait of a Lady*. Eliot was absorbed in a philosophy that offered her a free mind and this was something that James greatly admired, as evident in his letter to Grace Norton remarking that "a marvelous mind throbs in every page of *Middlemarch*. It raises the standard of what is to be expected of women (by your leave!) we know all about the female heart; but apparently there is a female brain, too" (*Letters 1*, p. 351). James was not only interested in *Middlemarch*; rather, he believed that *Daniel Deronda* as well possessed a gorgeous mind. In another letter to his brother William, he noted "your remarks on *D.D* [*Daniel Deronda*] were most sagacious. The book is a great expose of the female mind" (12 January 1877, MH-H). (Note 3) In fact, in the same year that Eliot's novel was published, James was so enchanted by her that he wrote "*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*" (1876). This essay shows the importance of Eliot as a model for *The Portrait of a Lady*.

"*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*" is a discussion between three characters (Theodora, Pulcheria and Constantius) who argue about Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* while having some ideas about *Middlemarch*. The story revolves around their criticism of Eliot's novel. This conversation includes at least two comments which explicitly confirm my argument that James observed the ideas of the world as will and suffering through Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot's heroine, Gwendolen Harleth, is a beautiful and complacent lady who is struggling to maintain her freedom; meanwhile, her marriage with cruel Henleigh Grandcourt leads to her being crushed by a cold, self-centred and manipulative husband. Constantius, James's spokesman in the "Conversation," is knowledgeable and has written reviews as well as one novel since the time of the conversation. He describes Gwendolen's story in a way which is remarkably applicable to James's heroine, Isabel: "The universe forcing itself with a slow, inexorable pressure into a narrow complacent, and yet after all extremely sensitive mind, and making it ache with the pain of the process- that is Gwendolen's story" (*Conversation*, p. 9). The internal pressure that forces Gwendolen and Isabel to choose their mates is similar. It is the *will* that forms their egoistic character and leads to their failure. Gwendolen's character embodies an "inborn energy of egoistic desire" (*Daniel*, p. 40). We observe that as well in Isabel's character when the narrator considers her as a "rank egoist" (*Portrait*, p. 53). Relying on their egoism, both heroines look for liberty in their marriage while the reality of marriage means not being independent. In both the novels, we encounter the narrators' emphasis on the heroines' wilful character. We see that Gwendolen's "willful" (*Daniel*, p. 444) thoughts do not allow her to sleep and Isabel as well is introduced to us as a person with a "strong will" (*Portrait*, p. 42). The novels reveal this idea that the way in which Isabel and Gwendolen commit themselves to their personal desires and the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon them by their own *will*. It is the existence of this characteristic in their nature that prevents them from seeing the absurdity of their desire.

Furthermore, the relationship between Gwendolen and Grandcourt is consistent with egoism and the will. The idea of the will is presented in both characters and forces them into a trap of their own making. From the start of the novel, the most important thing in Gwendolen's and Grandcourt's movement is self-gratification. Grandcourt

is aware of his wife's selfishness and his idea is "to engage all his wife's egoism on the same side as his own, ... she ought to understand that he was the only possible envoy" (*Daniel*, pp. 599-600). Such a movement is also observed in the relationship between Isabel and Osmond when he wants her mind "to be his-attached to his own ... he expected her intelligence to operate altogether in his favour" (*Portrait*, p. 432). The frustrating selfish manner in which James embodies Osmond's character is not merely indebted to Grandcourt, for that egoistic quality can also be traced in Eliot's character, Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Casaubon is a selfish character who longs for his own satisfaction and knowledge. He represents a blind ego, one that illogically and irrationally wants for and attains useless information just for the sake of acquiring it; it is a display of an unregulated unhealthy will and its ceaseless "pining hunger" (*Middlemarch*, p. 494). What is observable in Eliot's authorial voice, in asserting Casaubon's and Grandcourt's character, is that they are both a certain representation of a wilful egoism which can be the fundamental nature of all individuals.

James's conception of Osmond is strongly similar to Casaubon and Grandcourt. Osmond's qualities suggest that James entailed the conflicts of Casaubon's characteristics and Grandcourt's in creating Osmond's character. The likeness between Casaubon and Osmond is confirmed by the common nature of the disillusion of both Dorothea and Isabel in realising the truth about their husbands. Dorothea chooses Casaubon partly because he is an intellectual and spiritual man and is not like her other suitors among "the commonest minds" (*Middlemarch*, p. 46). She thinks that in Casaubon's characteristic there is "clearly something better than anger and despondency" (*Middlemarch*, p. 210). This "something better" is her husband's knowledge and intellect that might enable her to achieve what she could not gain (knowledge). James's *The Portrait of a Lady* recounts Isabel's involvement with the same illusory perspective. Isabel is fascinated with Osmond's "knowledge of life" while "his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers" (*Portrait*, p. 430). She regards Osmond as having a fine mind and a deep soul. She rejects Ralph's reservations about Osmond that he is "narrow [and] selfish" (*Portrait*, p. 345). Her youthful and naive mind is unable to believe her cousin. If Osmond is "to be narrow, if that's to be selfish, then it's very well" to her and she is not "frightened by such words" (*Portrait*, p. 347). "His ugliness; his awkwardness ... [and] the state of his health had seemed not a limitation [to her], but a kind of intellectual advantage" (*Portrait*, p. 337). Soon after marriage, the heroines discover the tragic waste not only of their husbands but their own steadfast will. For instance, Isabel realises that "Osmond's beautiful mind gave [her] neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her" (*Portrait*, p. 429).

James and Eliot posit their egoistic heroines in marriages with men who possess the same wilful quality. The heroines are unaware of just how crucial and offensive the will can be. They are a perfect picture of youthfulness, lack of knowledge and egoism. For example, in James's "Conversation," Constantius observes Gwendolen's immaturity and agrees that she "is perhaps at the first a little childish for the weight of interest she has to carry" (*Conversation*, p. 9). This criticism is perhaps not applicable to Isabel, whose immaturity, is of a radically different kind. The foundation of Isabel's knowledge is based on books and magazines and she lacks a true image of reality. Although these characters suffer from lack of knowledge at the beginning, they obtain a greater knowledge of their inner nature through their experience of conjugal life. Gwendolen's main delusion is the belief that she can overpower Grandcourt in a similar manor as she had subordinated other men. Isabel and Dorothea, on the other hand, though they are warned about their husbands' wilfulness, have the same perspective and enter their marriage completely deceived about their character. It seems that for both novelists the very chance to acknowledge the truth of internal pressure, the will, is through experience.

Despite experience that seems the only way of recognising the inner nature, in the novels, there exists a clever and intellectual mind who wants to make the protagonist conscious of her illusory love and acts. Daniel in Eliot's novel is a great example of this idea, likewise Ralph in James's work. The use of these two characters gives one the sense that both authors were considering a moral philosophy. Daniel is the counterpart to Gwendolen, or the counterpart in the matter of egoism. He has a tendency to help others at a cost to himself and he is the one who guides Gwendolen onto a path of righteousness on which she will overcome her suffering and will by helping others. It creates this idea that the remedy of egoism is self-denial. In the novels, the central view of compassion seems to be one's reaction to another's possible or real suffering and that compassion causes one to treat another's misery as one treats one's own misery. It appears that Daniel, by embracing the characteristic essence of compassion and duty for others, wants to lead the desire of the individual will in charitable directions. Likewise, in James's *Portrait*, there is something very fascinating in Ralph's mission. He is a very generous man. He ignores his own self and provides Isabel an inheritance in the hope of freeing her from financial considerations when selecting a mate. He is the one who looks after Isabel and also warns her about Osmond. Daniel and Ralph are the only men with whom the heroines achieve communication and understanding. Indeed,

the heroic activity of these men is meant to emphasise on the destructive role of egoism and stress the discrepancy between desire and what is achievable.

Moreover, although the role of intellect seems ineffectual and faint in heroines' character, the main characteristic of both Daniel and Ralph includes a connection between the will and intellect. In their character, the intellect appears on occasion to steer their will. Daniel's character, to a large degree, can be explained by this view. He is the only one in Eliot's novel that shows "his intellect [as] he [begins] to examine the grounds of his emotion, and consider[s] how far he must resist its guidance" (*Daniel*, p. 510). What Eliot wants to emphasize is Daniel's "want of tact" (James, *Conversation*, p. 7). As James states in his essay, "in the manner of Daniel Deronda, throughout, there is something that one may call a want of tact. The epigraphs in verse are a want of tact; ... the importunity of the moral reflections is a want of tact; the very diffuseness of the book is a want of tact" (*Conversation*, p. 7). If we interpret "want of tact" to the "will of intellect," then Daniel's character, as a person who examines his emotion and resists "its guidance," offers a new solution to the problem of blind will. In what Daniel's character suggests, we find logic meaningful and practical. Furthermore, according to James's essay, we realise that the moral concern of Eliot's novel lies in the idea of "want of act."

### 3. Conclusion

It is possible to say that in the majority of the cases, it is the same conflict (between the mind and the will) that forms the tragic end of a romance novel. For instance, this point and its supporting imagery, as previously shown, appear in *Daniel Deronda*, albeit arranged differently, and concern primarily the psychological identity of an individual, the power of will, and the reality of selfishness. The same structure can be seen in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. There are good reasons, internal and external, to consider Eliot's selected works as a model for this novel. In James's "Conversation," Constantius frequently emphasises that he can read "nothing of George Eliot's without enjoyment" (p. 4). He states that "in whatever she writes I enjoy her mind – her large, luminous, airy mind" (*Conversation*, p. 4). It is enlightening that James used George Eliot as a touchstone to write *The Portrait of a Lady*. Eliot's novels provide a struggle between ego and sympathy in the lives of the characters, while the idea of the will pervades their personal characteristics. Bearing in mind that *The Portrait of a Lady* is indebted to *Daniel Deronda* and in some senses to *Middlemarch* creates a clear understanding of Eliot's influence in James's novel. It is possible to say that James structures his characters in terms that resemble Eliot's characters. If one acknowledges *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch* as the preferred measure of James's character selection in writing *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is possible to say that Gwendolen and Dorothea, Grandcourt and Casaubon, and Daniel and Ladislav resemble Isabel's selfishness and her pursuit of free-will, Osmond's egotism and lack of genuine affection, and Ralph's generosity as "[he] had never been egotistic" (*Portrait*, p. 502). Further, the condemnation of the will as the source of human misery could be seen in *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* and *The Portrait of a Lady* as a common theme, and the denial of self as a compassionate act is viewed as a remedy for egoism.

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### Notes

Note 1. James wrote this commentary in the preface of the New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* twenty-five years after the novel was originally published.

Note 2. Bellringer's *Henry James*.

Note 3. I need to clarify that James's understanding of "female mind" underscores only the works he discusses with his brother and Grace Norton, rather than attributing his theory to all Eliot's novels.

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