The Spoiled Child: What Happened to Gwendolen Harleth?

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Much has been written about the wounded psyche of Gwendolen Harleth, the extraordinary creature at the centre of George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda. ‘Not fully explained’ is the conclusion of many critics as they seek to understand the source of Gwendolen’s hysterical outbursts and crippling dread which seem so disproportionate to her circumstances.¹ How does one explain such hatred and such despair? She seems trapped in some nightmare realm that lies beneath the narrative of her life. While theories of Freudian hysteria or Victorian female neurosis may help to explain Gwendolen, critics seem to have missed the key to the puzzle.

Notably absent from the critical discussion about Gwendolen is consideration of an obvious source of her dysfunction: her experience of incest at the hands of her stepfather, Captain Davilow. The idea of incest is not only an intuition based on a few delicate hints in the novel – it runs like a sinister stream through the narrative, gathering force with the author’s striking choice of words, potent images, and repeated references. It reverberates in the numerous allusions to the ‘spoiled child’ and the

‘little white bed’, and culminates in Gwendolene’s violent fit of hysteria on her wedding night when her stepfather’s treachery becomes merged in her mind with her husband’s. In that moment, notes Eliot in a telling phrase, Gwendolene is overwhelmed by ‘the insistent penetration of suppressed experience, mixing the expectation of a triumph with the dread of a crisis’ (p. 404).\(^2\)

The suggestion of incest first struck me while I was exploring other themes in \textit{Daniel Deronda} for my doctoral dissertation.\(^3\) The more I worked on the novel, the more I became convinced that a careful reader can hardly avoid the incest theme – it is the ‘ground bass’ that rumbles underneath the unfolding of Gwendolene’s story. ‘There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms’, notes Eliot in one of Gwendolene’s dark moments (p. 321). She reminds us that ‘all meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation’ (p. 88). Once the key of childhood incest is applied, the meaning of Gwendolene’s ‘blighted’ life unfolds with astonishing clarity, adding a vital dimension to an already intricate text. Why have so few critics picked up this theme? Perhaps assumptions about ‘Victorian prudery’ have limited readings of the novel. Perhaps contemporary readers are too accustomed to explicit expression to draw inferences about sexual matters. Given Eliot’s sharp eye for psychological nuance, especially regarding women, one can assume that she would not shy away from the reality of sexual abuse. In her essay on \textit{Wilhelm Meister}, Eliot defends the morality of works that go beyond what many deem to be ‘proper subjects’ for literature, such as the depiction of ‘irregular relations’ among characters. A writer, she states, may take for his subject ‘the most hideous passions’ as long as there is ‘some trait of love, or endurance, or helplessness to call forth our best sympathies’.\(^4\)

Furthermore, in the literature of Eliot’s day, incest is a not uncommon theme. The gothic novels so popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are steeped in sexual violence and perversion. In \textit{The Mysterious Mother} by Horace Walpole, for example, a mother tricks her son into her bed and later tries to prevent him from marrying the product of that union. Romantic writers such as Byron and Shelley touch on incest in their writings, and Swinburne, whom Eliot was reading while composing

\(^2\) \textit{Daniel Deronda}, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth 1967); page references to the novel in the text are to this edition.
Deronda, is obsessed with ‘irregular relations’. Two works that offer particular interest for the creation of Gwendolen are Shelley’s The Cenci (1820) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun (1860). Both build on the harrowing story of Beatrice Cenci, a victim of incest who rallied her family to kill their brutal father. It is highly probable that the Cenci legend influenced Eliot’s own creation.5

A few critics have approached the possibility of incest but then veered off in other directions. Judith Wilt, in her insightful discussion of father and husband in Gwendolen’s life, suggests that the text implies some scene of ‘seduction’ or ‘genuine assaults during infancy or adolescence’, but she leaves it as a ‘probability’ rather than seeking evidence in the novel. Gwendolen’s tragedy, says Wilt, is her incapacity to exorcise a female ‘fantasy’ or ‘gender-memory akin to the racial memory of the Jews’. Later in the article she returns to the idea of actual incest: ‘The most dramatic interpretation of Gwendolen’s helpless enslavement to, then murderous hatred of, the “wand” . . . of Captain Davilow/Grandcourt’s languid authority, of Davilow’s departure just after Gwendolen had entered puberty, would have the stepfather her actual seducer, a situation less uncommon in life than in fiction.’6

Building on Wilt’s reading, Louise Penner examines Gwendolen’s ‘hidden wounds’ in light of textual silence and recovered memory. The signs point to incest, concludes Penner, but it cannot be ‘proved’ from the text: ‘The textual evidence of Gwendolen’s psychic wound is abundant, yet its origin is never explicitly revealed.’7 While Penner may be right on a literal level (the word ‘incest’ never appears in Daniel Deronda), she misses the explicit case made for incest within the novel itself. The source of Gwendolen’s trauma is obvious from the narrative, as this article will demonstrate, and it is the only adequate explanation of why she is the way she is.

5 Shelley’s The Cenci is cited in Daniel Deronda, as shown below. While Eliot did not document her response to The Marble Faun, she did acknowledge that ‘Hawthorne is a grand favourite of mine’ (The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven 1955) vol. ii, p. 52). Comparing these two works with the incest theme in Daniel Deronda would make an interesting study.

6 Judith Wilt, ‘He Would Come Back’, Nineteenth Century Literature, 42/3 (Dec. 1987). Dianne F. Sadoff, in Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Bronte on Fatherhood (Baltimore 1982), observes that Eliot is always interested in ‘father—daughter seduction’, but Sadoff passes over the stepfather to focus on Grandcourt as the father-figure.

Eliot introduces a sense of unease on the first page of the novel, warning the reader to tread carefully concerning Gwendolen: ‘Was she beautiful or not beautiful? And what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm?’ The ‘dynamic’ quality of these questions, certainly meant to unsettle the reader, suggests a heroine who is ill at ease and off balance, marked by an inner restlessness. Eliot’s description of the gambling resort heightens the sense of unease. Pleasure comes at ‘a heavy cost of gilt mouldings, dark-toned colour and chubby nudities, all correspondingly heavy’. The spotlight suddenly shifts to a ‘melancholy little boy’ in fancy dress who is staring at the exit with ‘the blank gaze of a bedizened child stationed as a masquerading advertisement on the platform of an itinerant show’ (pp. 35–6).

What is a child doing here? He obviously doesn’t belong in this world of adult pleasures. He has the numbed look of a helpless creature being forced to perform for strangers. Is Eliot hinting at unnatural, exploitative relations between child and adult? The ‘itinerant show’, corresponding to the sense of unrest in Gwendolen, introduces a theme of disguise and secrecy, of dealings hidden from the light: the adults here all exhibit a ‘uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask’ (p. 37). And what are we to make of the references to ‘pleasure at a heavy cost’, and the linking of heavy, dark fixtures with ‘chubby nudities’? What Eliot is setting up in these opening pages is the backdrop to Gwendolen’s story: a fallen, threatening world, peopled by jaded adults who compete like vultures in a ‘scene of dull, gas-poisoned absorption’ (p. 37). It is a ‘spoiled’ world which has produced ‘the spoiled child’, title of the first book. The dark setting warns the reader that the spoiling of this child goes much deeper than petty selfishness and bad manners. (A contemporary reader also brings the sexual connotation of ‘spoiled goods’.) The symptoms of some hidden trauma are obvious right from Gwendolen’s first appearance. She is self-conscious and insecure to the point of paranoia, imagining that Deronda is ‘measuring and looking down on her as an inferior’.8 There are signs of self-loathing in her

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8 Gwendolen’s sensitivity to being watched brings to mind recent critical interest in the psychology of ‘the gaze’ as presented by Jacques Lacan and others. Space does not permit exploration of that theme here. The sense of Gwendolen being ‘spoiled’ returns at the end of the novel when she muses that Deronda might easily have ‘spoiled his mission’ by misusing his influence on her. She is certain he hasn’t, but many readers are not so sure. See Reimer, ‘Hebraism in English Literature’, 162–70.
suspicion that she is considered ‘a specimen of a lower order’ (p. 38) or ‘one of an insect swarm’ (p. 40). Her contradictory emotions veer from a desperate longing to be noticed (‘she had visions of being followed by a cortège who would worship her a as goddess of luck and watch her play’) to suffering under a man’s gaze with ‘a pressure which begins to be torturing’. She controls her extreme emotions only by ‘an inward defiance’ (pp. 38–9).

Observers at the gambling tables identify Gwendolen with ‘the serpent’ or Lamia, the snake-temptress who uses her sexuality to lure men to their downfall. In other settings, one might write off those comments as mere cattiness or snobbery, but in this context they strike a chilling note: the temptress, we will discover, is herself the victim of a sexual curse that is torturing her.9 She is not what she appears: her features are too pale and her smile is too intentional and ‘immovable’ (pp. 40–1, 47). The desirable woman is the role she is fated to play for her travelling show – it is the role she inherited as a child and the only weapon she knows against despair. In an almost dissociative state, Gwendolen watches her own masquerade unfold:

Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. How could she believe in sorrow? If it attacked her, she felt the force to crush it, to defy it, or run away from it, as she had done already. Anything seemed more possible than that she could go on bearing miseries, great or small.

(p. 47)

The image in the mirror, which looks warm and human, belies the frigidity at the heart of Gwendolen’s being. Her sexuality lies frozen within her, thwarting her ability to defy her misery through sexual conquest, the only path she can imagine. Even Deronda, the intuitive ‘saviour’ of women, has no idea who Gwendolen is – he is suspicious that something ‘demonic’ lurks inside that beautiful exterior (pp. 99, 408, 459). ‘Strange and piteous to think what a centre of wretchedness a delicate piece of

9 Publisher John Blackwood’s first response to Gwendolen was much like the reaction at the gaming tables: in letters he referred to her as the ‘mermaid witch’ and ‘fascinating witch’ (25 May 1875), and ‘that wicked witch Gwendolen’ (10 Nov. 1875). After reading further, however, his tone changed: ‘There is an immense puzzlement as to what the author is going to make of Gwendolen’, he wrote on 10 April 1876, and two months later he commented: ‘The situation of Gwendolen and Deronda is so new ... and oh so delicately handled’ (10 June 1876). The George Eliot Letters, vol. vi, pp. 144, 182, 238, 263.
human flesh like that might be ... But what do I know of her? There may be a demon in her to match the worst husband, for what I can tell’ (p. 466).

One clue to Gwendolen’s nature is her name. According to Eliot’s notebooks, Gwendolen is a name related to Diana/Artemis, virgin goddess of the hunt.  That association sheds light on the conflicted nature that defines Gwendolen: she is beautiful and cold, frigid yet fierce, ‘a perfect Diana’, according to Sir Hugo (p. 199). Like the goddess, Gwendolen is an accomplished archer who sets her sights on human prey: ‘My arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave ... fall at my feet. I shall laugh at him ...’ (p. 127). The hunter, however, is also the hunted – first by the father and then by Grandcourt, who is also ‘on the watch for prey’ (p. 465). Like Artemis, Gwendolen is so outraged by the violation of her chastity that death seems the only fitting revenge.

The references to Gwendolen’s childhood are heavy with suggestion of something gone terribly wrong. ‘Pity’ is the first word of chapter 3, which opens with a contrast between home as it ought to be and Gwendolen’s aborted childhood: home should be ‘a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection. ... At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world’ (p. 50). The statement, heavy with sexual innuendo, recalls the benumbed child in the gambling den. The ‘evil step-father’ image is prevalent. Gwendolen’s first reference to Captain Davilow is the memory of an ‘unlovable step-father whom she had been acquainted with the greater part of her life while her frocks were short’ (p. 52). Again, the sexual innuendo in ‘short frocks’ is obvious. When Gwendolen tells her mother that ‘it would have been nicer’ if she had not remarried, Mrs Davilow responds with uncharacteristic violence, a ‘convulsive movement’ passing over her flushed face before she shuts down the conversation.

Gwendolen is the favoured child, indulged by her mother and siblings. Why is this so? ‘The answer may seem to lie quite on the surface: – in her beauty, a certain unusualness about her, a decision of will’ (p. 71). But that obviously is not the real answer, implies the narrator, as the passage moves into a disturbing discussion of stepfathers and men in general. Mrs Davilow ‘had always been in an apologetic state of mind for the evils brought on her by a step-father’. But beware of jumping to conclusions without comparison, says the narrator. Is Eliot suddenly drawing back

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from the obvious conclusion? On the contrary, what she suggests is that even children ‘not at all beautiful or unusual’, including males, can be the victims of abusive fathers. ‘Who is so much cajoled and served with trembling by the weak females of a household as the unscrupulous male – capable, if he has not free way at home, of going and doing worse elsewhere?’ Gwendolen may be a ‘princess’ who exerts considerable power in her own little sphere, but she is a ‘princess in exile’ (p. 71), evoking for biblically steeped Victorian readers not only the Chosen People in slavery but sinful humanity in exile from God’s grace. Gwendolen’s violent resentment against her family (in a rage she strangles her sister’s canary) seems out of proportion for a favoured child, unless one considers the early sexual violence for which she was singled out. In psychological terms, one sees Gwendolen ‘acting out’ her anger for the acts done to her, while desperately clinging to a sense of entitlement for what she has endured.

The Clarendon edition of *Daniel Deronda* notes several interpolations in chapters 3 and 4 of Eliot’s written manuscript which underscore the hidden terrors beneath Gwendolen’s sense of self. One addition is Gwendolen’s identification with St Cecilia (p. 55), bringing to mind the image of the virgin martyr just before Gwendolen sees the dead face and fleeing figure in the ominous picture. Is St Cecilia meant to be a contrast to the figure fleeing her fate or a signal of Gwendolen’s own doom? In another addition, Gwendolen examines herself in the bedroom mirror, convincing herself that she will make ‘a tolerable Saint Cecilia’ despite her ‘happy nose’. On the surface, the notion of a ‘tolerable martyr’ raises the absurdity of an egotistical young woman playing at martyrdom, but the scene also hints at the real suffering that is well hidden beneath Gwendolen’s breezy manner. Mrs Davilow responds tellingly, ‘Oh, my dear, any nose will do to be miserable with in this world’ (p. 57). At the end of chapter 4, Eliot adds a reference to *Macbeth*: ‘Who can be wise, amazed, temperate and furious, loyal and neutral, in a moment?’. Eliot comments that ‘we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment; but a moment is room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance’ (p. 72). Coming on the heels of a disturbing discussion about step-fathers, these words emphasise the contradictory, debilitating emotions that plague Gwendolen, and hint at worse things to come.

Conversations between Gwendolen and her mother are heavy with implications of sexual abuse. When Gwendolen argues that a high, feminine voice is more tragic for ‘desperate actions’, her mother responds: ‘if there is anything horrible to be done, I should like it to be left to the men’. In the next breath she notes that Gwendolen is ‘afraid to be alone in the night’ (p. 85). After Gwendolen’s cruel description of Mallinger Grandcourt as ‘a magnified insect’ that she intends to pierce with an arrow and subdue, Mrs Davilow replies: ‘Don’t talk in that way, child. . . . I declare when your aunt and I were your age we knew nothing about wickedness. I think it was better so.’ Gwendolen responds tellingly, ‘Why did you not bring me up in that way, mamma?’, realising immediately from her mother’s distress that ‘she had given a deep wound’ (pp. 127–9). In a conversation about Deronda’s parentage, Mrs Davilow is angry with herself for bringing up the topic, for she wants to protect Gwendolen from the ‘knowledge of the world’ that she had had ‘thrust’ upon her (pp. 378–9). Gwendolen is not surprised that Deronda may be angry with his father: ‘Haven’t children reason to be angry with their parents?’. Mrs Davilow observes that Gwendolen might have been more controllable ‘if everything else had been different’ (p. 129). Both mother and daughter confess ‘dread with the particular topics’ that drive them into conflict, Gwendolen reacting with ‘the nearest approach to self-condemnation and self-distrust that she had known’, and Mrs Davilow with her ‘timid maternal conscience’.

These scenes between mother and daughter dance painfully around the issue of abuse. Is Eliot protecting sensitive readers from the obvious conclusion or is she implying that these women may not be aware of the extent of the damage Gwendolen has suffered? Gwendolen often uses her sense of betrayal as a weapon against her mother, pushing her to acknowledge what happened: ‘I don’t see why it is hard to call things by their right names, and put them in their proper places’ (p. 58). Her awareness of childhood sexual abuse only comes to full consciousness, however, with her sexual awakening as an adult. Mrs Davilow usually attempts to downplay or avoid the topic, undoubtedly to protect her daughter (and herself) from further distress.

One wonders how much the Gascoigne aunt and uncle know. Mrs Gascoigne is highly anxious that her sons should not fall in love with Gwendolen. After Gwendolen rejects Rex as a suitor, Mrs Gascoigne breathes a sigh of relief: ‘I can only be thankful that she doesn’t care about him. . . . here are things in Gwendolen I cannot reconcile myself to’ (p. 111). Mr Gascoigne, recognising that Gwendolen ‘has been under a disadvantage with such a father-in-law . . . keeping her always in the shade’ (p. 66), cannot see, however, why anyone would wish Gwendolen ‘a worse end of her
charming maidenhood’ than a brilliant marriage (p. 68). Gascoigne is convinced that even with the earlier ‘disadvantage’ (the understatement of a male who knows the ways of the world?), Gwendolen still holds enough advantages to get a good bargain. It seems a rather brutal way of putting it. Eliot quickly reassures the reader that Mr Gascoigne is a ‘rational’ and ‘good-natured man’ by pointing out that he did not even think of getting too frisky a horse in order that Gwendolen might be threatened with an accident and be rescued by a man of property’ (p. 68). The whole passage raises doubts concerning the benevolence of male protectors, even the ones with apparently good intentions.

An obvious sign of Gwendolen’s early sexual abuse is her violent reaction to a man’s touch, even from gentle Rex. Her abhorrence is simply too extreme to be explained by any standards of Victorian modesty or sensitivity. Her ‘fierceness of maidenhood’ is too fierce by far (pp. 101–2), raising again the image of Artemis. With Rex’s advances Gwendolen suddenly becomes aware of how repelled she is by any sign of physical lovemaking. ‘But now the life of passion had begun negatively in her’, states the text suggestively, linking her first adult experience with an earlier ‘negative beginning’ (p. 114). Gwendolen has a pathological horror of physical contact with anyone except her mother; her revulsion at any form of caress is so extreme it extends to a ‘hatred’ for all people. Gwendolen’s vow that ‘I shall never love anybody’ is followed by her mother’s expression of grief for her ‘spoiled child’ (p. 115). Used in this context, the spoiling obviously signifies much more than parental doting or overindulgence. Gwendolen’s bitter creed – ‘I believe all men are bad and I hate them’ (p. 192) – cannot be explained except by assuming some traumatic sexual experience in her past. ‘The embitterment of hatred is often as unaccountable to onlookers as the growth of devoted love, and it not only seems but is really out of direct relation with any outward causes to be alleged’, notes Eliot in a revealing passage. ‘And the intensest form of hatred is that rooted in fear’ (pp. 736–7). Fear of men who abuse and subjugate, engendered in childhood, is at the heart of Gwendolen’s spoiled sexuality.

The setting and narrative elements discussed above clearly point to the probability of incest in Gwendolen’s childhood, and Eliot’s choice of words and images reinforces that interpretation. For example, the predominance of ‘gross’ animal imagery keeps before the reader the realm of brute sexuality and perversion. Grandcourt is repeatedly referred to as a ‘lizard’ (pp. 174, 648, 649), and Mr Lush as a ‘hog’ and ‘the toad-eater the least liable to nausea’ (pp. 350, 327). Grandcourt vows that his new wife will be ‘brought to kneel down like a horse under training . . . though she might have an objection to it’. That suggestion of rape is echoed in
Gwendolen’s reference to her husband as ‘a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation’ (p. 735). ‘I don’t know – this is such a brute of a world, things are always turning up that one doesn’t like’, says Grandcourt breezily just after Gwendolen has accepted his proposal of marriage (p. 349). Gwendolen’s fear of being considered a ‘specimen of a lower order’ comes to fruition in her degrading marriage in which her will is reduced to that of ‘a crab or a boa-constrictor which goes on pinching or crushing without alarm at thunder’ (p. 477).

This brutalised discourse in the novel heightens the intensity of Gwendolen’s revulsion and dread concerning men. When one accepts incest as a key to interpreting the novel, Eliot’s choice of vocabulary bristles with suggestions of victimisation and abuse: Gwendolen is a spoiled child, convinced that ‘people have come near me only to blight me’ (p. 274); she vows not to let people interfere with her any more (pp. 58, 147), or to let misfortune do what it would with her (p. 270). Her marriage feels like a forbidden thing (p. 379). On her wedding night Gwendolen grows febrile in her excitement, recalling the insistent penetration of suppressed experience (p. 404). She imagines hidden rites of vengeance (p. 737). These highly charged expressions alert the reader to the underlying narrative that informs Gwendolen’s story, making more plausible her violent outbursts and unpredictable behaviour. At Ryelands just after her marriage she fiercely attacks Deronda’s casual comment that it is stupid to hate people who stand in your way. But what if such people ‘injure you and could have helped it’ she asks, ‘with a hard intensity unaccountable in incidental talk like this’ (p. 465). That ‘hard intensity’ becomes accountable if one considers how deeply Gwendolen feels betrayed by both father and husband.

One of the most obvious suggestions of incest is the recurring image of ‘the little white bed’, the virginal childhood refuge that was supposed to keep Gwendolen safe. The author notes that ‘when possible’ it was arranged that Gwendolen would have ‘a small bed in her mamma’s room’ (p. 53). The explanation is that Mrs Davilow’s ‘motherly tenderness clung chiefly to her eldest girl’. Was she trying to protect her daughter from her stepfather? It doesn’t seem to have worked, because that little bed retains memories of both comfort and fear for Gwendolen. It is noteworthy that she feels much safer in the women’s compartment of a train than in her own bed (p. 50). The little white bed embodies the conflicting emotions that define Gwendolen. Although wilful and seemingly independent, she continues to sleep in her mother’s room as an adult. She is afraid of being alone in the dark. The bedroom at Offendene contains ‘a pretty little white couch’ beside the black and yellow ‘best bed’, described by Eliot as a ‘catafalque’ (p. 56). This ghoulish reference is undoubtedly a great deal more significant than merely a ‘rather heavy joke about the
Victorian “best bed” (editor’s endnote, p. 886). While this bedroom no longer contains a threatening stepfather, it retains the deadly memories that traumatised Gwendolen, memories that she is unable to transcend.

The family’s financial downfall brings back Gwendolen’s old fears ‘like an uncomfortable waking’ from sleep, a waking ‘worse than the uneasy dreams which had gone before’ (p. 270). This evocative image appears to link the dreaded present with the dreadful memory of waking to the presence of the unwelcome stepfather at her bedside. How else can one explain the bitterness of Gwendolen’s immediate attack on men as the cause of her situation: ‘what was the good of it all? Events might turn out anyhow, and men were hateful. Yes, men were hateful. Those few words were filled out with very vivid memories.’ As Gwendolen’s marriage approaches, sleep ‘in her little white bed’ eludes her (p. 355). Her torment over Lydia Glasher’s betrayal has awakened memories of another man’s treachery and her unresolved guilt about it. Likewise, her dread of becoming a mother emerges from this web of mingled horrors.

Grandcourt’s first overtly sexual overture, a kiss ‘a little below her ear’, sets off warning bells in Gwendolen’s mind. She is conscious of ‘a vague fear’ that she is no longer in control, that she is allowing herself ‘to mount a chariot where another held the reins’ (pp. 371–3). The marriage threatens to repeat the horrors of her childhood, imprisoning her in a trap of sexual degradation, guilt, and betrayal of self. The text explicitly links the two experiences in her mind: ‘It was not only what she would have felt months before – that she might seem to be reproaching her mother for that second marriage of hers; – what she chiefly felt now was, that she had been led on to a condemnation which seemed to make her own marriage a forbidden thing’ (p. 379). Stepfather and husband are becoming merged in her tormented mind. Even after both are dead, she cannot overcome her nightmares. In Genoa, right after Grandcourt’s drowning, Gwendolen is again sleeping in a room with her mother, ‘as she would have done in her early girlhood’, linking her current horror to her girlhood fears (p. 824). Gwendolen bristles when her mother suggests a sleeping draught. ‘You don’t know what would be good for me. You and my uncle must not contradict me and tell me anything is good for me when I feel it is not good.’ Mrs Davilow is silent, ‘not wondering that the poor child was irritable’ (p. 825). One gets the sense that Gwendolen has regressed to childhood under the strain, reacting with mistrust and guilty rage against any interference from adults. Guilt over Grandcourt is obviously not the only thing on her mind: ‘It is because I was always wicked that I am miserable now’ (p. 825). Later she confesses to Deronda: ‘I can’t sleep much ... things repeat themselves in me so. They come back – they will all come back’ (p. 840).
Several other narrative devices reinforce the link between stepfather and husband in Gwendolen’s mind. One is the symbol of the necklace. Although Gwendolen was once willing to part with the turquoise necklace from her birth father, acquaintance with Grandcourt has rendered it more precious to her. She seems to view it as a kind of talisman against her terror, representing both a true father figure and Deronda’s saving role in her life (pp. 319–21). As mother and daughter talk about their jewels – mostly gone by now – the spectre of the treacherous stepfather hovers over the scene. The sexual connotations of ‘lost ornaments’ become explicit with Mrs Davilow’s blushing comment: ‘All my best ornaments were taken from me long ago’ (p. 319). Those ornaments undoubtedly included her eldest daughter. Gwendolen’s necklace from her birth father is perverted by the ‘poisoned gems’ of Grandcourt’s betrayal. Turquoise gems, according to Eliot’s sources, are useful for riders, in keeping with Gwendolen’s image of herself as a woman in control of the reins. In exchanging that legacy for Grandcourt’s tainted diamonds, Gwendolen is transformed from a proud horsewoman into an enslaved animal.12

The diamond necklace – associated with serpent and flame – is the curse that seals Gwendolen’s fate (pp. 406, 480). Her haunting guilt over her childhood experience is now fused with her ‘willing wrong’ as an adult in betraying Lydia Glasher and marrying Grandcourt, and she breaks down as the enormity of her blighted life overwhelms her (p. 406). This necklace becomes a rope ‘flung over her neck’, threatening to choke her (p. 402). Gwendolen’s childhood memories of being violated, now vividly returned to consciousness, intensify her terror of Grandcourt’s domination; she imagines his fingers, like the diamond necklace, ‘threatening to throttle her’ (pp. 481, 626, 669).

The sordid affair of the necklace is an excellent example of how Eliot allows readers to ‘choose’ how deeply they wish to enter the novel. Gwendolen’s hysteria on her wedding night can be explained by the betrayal involved in her marriage, but the text also invites a darker, more controversial, reading which more fully ‘explains’ the immediate one. Eliot indicates as much when she observes that Mrs Davilow attributes Gwendolen’s ‘fits of timidity or terror’ to ‘sensitiveness’ or ‘excitability’ of nature, but that these explanations do not account for everything: ‘Heat is a great agent and a useful word, but considered as a means of explaining the universe it requires an extensive knowledge of differences; and as a means of explaining character “sensitiveness” is in much the same predicament’ (p. 95).

A dramatic link between stepfather and husband is the motif of the ‘dead face’. It first appears when a panel springs open revealing a picture of ‘an upturned dead face, from which an obscure figure seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms’ (p. 56). Gwendolen shudders and bursts into a rage at her sister Isabel for opening the panel. How does the narrator explain this extreme reaction? With the response of Isabel, an ‘inconvenient child with an alarming memory’, who says bluntly: ‘You will never stay in this room by yourself, Gwendolen.’ The implication is obvious: the picture has released the memory of a childhood trauma that Gwendolen has been trying to suppress. ‘How dare you open things which were meant to be shut up’, cries Gwendolen, appointing herself keeper of the key to the forbidden scene. After this traumatic encounter, mother and daughter retreat to the bedroom that holds the ‘catafalque’ best bed and the ‘pretty little white couch’ (p. 56). Surely the reawakened memory of sexual trauma is the most convincing explanation of this mysterious scene. What Gwendolen sees in the picture is the child fleeing from the stepfather, now dead. Only later does the face take on the identity of the dead husband.

The usual explanations – that this scene illustrates Gwendolen’s highly strung nature and foreshadows Grandcourt’s death – are simply not adequate given Gwendolen’s extreme reaction and the highly suggestive elements noted above. The dead face becomes an emblem of the forces that haunt Gwendolen: the deadly betrayal of a stepfather and a husband, mixed with the pursuing furies of her own guilt and rage. (An even more dramatic possibility would be that Gwendolen was involved in causing her stepfather’s death, but this does not seem to be supported by the text.) The allusion to unspeakable trauma is strikingly obvious in Gwendolen’s second encounter with the picture. Eliot’s written manuscript reveals that she added a section to make this scene even more dramatic: During the enactment of the tableau, just as Hermione/Gwendolen puts out her foot to advance, Pauline calls out: ‘Music, awake her, strike!’ , and Klesmer strikes a ‘thunderous chord’ on the piano, making the panel fly open, revealing the ‘dead face and fleeing figure’.13 The scene brilliantly evokes Gwendolen’s sense of being hounded by furies beyond her control. She collapses in a fit: ‘She looked like a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered: her pallid lips were parted; her eyes . . . were dilated and fixed’ (p. 91). No one in the room questions the reason for Gwendolen’s severe reaction; even she appears not yet fully conscious of its source – it seems to her ‘like a brief remembered madness’ (p. 94). She is highly conscious,

however, of her susceptibility to ‘fits of spiritual dread’. Meanwhile, she plays the role of a woman in control of her life, with ‘suitable manifestation or concealment’. The key is in her possession, enabling her to keep the nightmare locked away. (The idea of the key comes up again at Ryelands right after Gwendolen’s marriage when she is tempted by the knife in her locked drawer. Is she contemplating homicide or suicide? Throwing away the key doesn’t help – she is still tormented.) Gwendolen’s conviction that she is a good actress, both in life and in art, is shattered by Klesmer, stripping her of an essential defence mechanism and forcing her to begin to face her demons.

That ‘brief remembered madness’ returns to her consciousness in full force when she is faced with the sexual advances of her suitors. After marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen is haunted by ‘the self-dread which urged her to flee from the pursuing images’ (p. 737). Now Grandcourt has become identified with the ‘white dead face from which she was for ever trying to flee’ (pp. 738, 758), clearly linking him with the source of her earlier fears. Her illusions of control have fled; they are ‘now as futile as the burnt-out lights which set off a child’s pageant’ (p. 479), a peculiar image that recalls the displaced child of the itinerant show. As Gwendolen tries to explain the significance of the dead face to Deronda after the boat accident, her disjointed confession reveals how the two objects of her hatred have become confused in one image: ‘ever so long ago I saw it; and I wished him to be dead. And yet it terrified me. I was like two creatures. I could not speak – I wanted to kill – it was as strong as thirst – and then directly – I felt beforehand I had done something dreadful, unalterable – that would make me like an evil spirit. And it came – it came’ (p. 756).

It is highly significant that Eliot begins the chapter on Grandcourt’s drowning with a quotation from *The Cenci*, Shelley’s tragedy about incest: ‘The unwilling brain/feigns often what it would not; and we trust/Imagination with such phantasies/As the tongue dares not fashion into words;/Which have no words, their horror makes them dim/To the mind’s eye’ (p. 731). These words apply to the double horror of Gwendolen’s plight: her fantasy of killing her abusive stepfather will be realised in the death of her husband, leaving her not in purgatory like the slain wife Madonna Pia (p. 731) but in hell itself. Instead of ‘being delivered from her errors on earth and cleansed from their effect’, Gwendolen finds herself ‘at the very height of her entanglement’ (p. 732). Again, Eliot’s choice of words suggests an even deeper torment than that engendered by Grandcourt’s death: the ‘fatal meshes’ of Gwendolen’s captivity are largely hidden from view, ‘woven within more closely than without’, and her ‘inward torture’ appears to be ‘disproportionate to what is discernible as outward cause’.
In her confession to Deronda, Gwendolen pours out her pent-up accumulation of grief, hatred, and murderous visions. The reader might wonder whether she is confessing to incest or complicity in her husband’s drowning. The emotions against stepfather and husband are almost interchangeable; she could be recalling her childhood trauma when she says: ‘I ought to have gone away – gone and wandered like a beggar rather than stay to feel like a fiend. But turn where I would there was something I could not bear. Sometimes I thought he would kill me if I resisted his will’ (p. 758). She is overwhelmed by her wickedness, always adding that she felt wicked long before Grandcourt. ‘Am I worse than I was when you found me? All the wrong I have done was in me then – and more – and more’ (p. 755). ‘Getting wicked was misery – being shut out for ever from knowing what you – what better lives were. That had always been coming back to me in the midst of bad thoughts’ (p. 761). Deronda senses that there are other dimensions to Gwendolen’s story of the drowning: ‘She unconsciously left intervals in her retrospect, not clearly distinguishing between what she said and what she had only an inward vision of’ (p. 757). The identification of stepfather and husband becomes explicit as she comes to the climax of her story:

‘I was full of rage at being obliged to go – full of rage – and I could do nothing but sit there like a galley-slave . . . we never looked at each other, only he spoke to order me – and the very light about me seemed to hold me a prisoner and force me to sit as I did. It came over me that when I was a child I used to fancy sailing away into a world where people were not forced to live with any one they did not like – I did not like my father-in-law to come home. . . . And because I felt more helpless than ever, my thoughts went out over worse things. . . . I knew no way of killing him there, but I did, I did kill him in my thoughts.’

(p. 760)

Gwendolen sees her fantasy of revenge fulfilled, but her guilt and growing self-knowledge allow her no peace. She is convinced that she might have saved Grandcourt and redeemed herself, but she was too late: ‘I was leaping away from myself – I would have saved him then. I was leaping from my crime, and there it was – close to me as I fell – there was the dead face – dead, dead. It can never be altered’ (p. 761). It was as though the dead face of her stepfather intervened and she could not act. She fears that she is doomed. In a dramatic linking of serpent/demon/masquerade images, Gwendolen reflects on how she has been lured into a ‘Satanic masquerade, which she had entered on with an intoxicated belief in its disguises, and had seen the end of in shrieking
fear lest she herself had become one of the evil spirits who were dropping their human mummery and hissing around her with serpent tongues' (p. 831). Gwendolen’s masquerade as a charming, independent woman, already exposed at crucial points in her life, has been utterly destroyed by the death of Grandcourt. All her denials and defences have been torn away; what she fears most at this point is herself. It seems her rage has been spent, her hatred of men now absorbed into self-condemnation. Is this the first step towards healing? Can she be transformed?

These questions have in recent years captured the attention of the psychiatric community, which sees Gwendolen’s interaction with Deronda as a forerunner of the therapeutic relationship. One might expect to find here some fresh analysis of Gwendolen’s neurosis, but so far little has been forthcoming. British psychiatrist Margot Waddell concludes that ‘some kind of unlocated but pathological guilt is central to Gwendolen’s inner struggles’, but she does see Daniel’s intervention in terms that are significant for a diagnosis of incest. She argues that Gwendolen’s ‘acute persecutory dread’ is ‘detoxified’ through Deronda’s understanding, that she is able to develop a more mature capacity to distinguish between ‘the actions for which she should legitimately be taking responsibility and those which stem from an exaggerated or pathological form of anxiety and dread’. This comment summarises in psychological terms what

14 PsyArt, an online journal for the psychological study of the arts, posted a collection of essays in 2000 entitled ‘Psychoanalytic Perspectives on George Eliot’, ed. Bernard J. Paris. In this collection, Carl T. Rotenberg notes that ‘Eliot was sensitive to the ways in which childhood experiences can set the stage for psychological organisation later in life’, but he concludes lamely that ‘Gwendolen’s emotional conflicts in relation to men arise out of the loss of her father early in life, coupled with indifference to her as a child on the part of paternal surrogates’ (‘George Eliot – Proto-Psychoanalyst’). Rotenberg has also published an essay called ‘Gwendolen Harleth’s Hatred: A Literary Portrait’, Psychoanalytic Inquiry, 20/3 (30 June 2000). Several articles on the therapeutic relationship between Deronda and Gwendolen appear in the Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry, 30/1 (Spring 2002). Current proponents of ‘trauma theory’, such as Jill L. Matus, are examining George Eliot’s heroines from a psychological perspective as well, although we have yet to see an analysis of Gwendolen.

15 Margot Waddell, ‘On Ideas of “the Good” and of “the Ideal” in George Eliot’s Novels and in Post-Kleinian Psychoanalytic Thought’, PsyArt (2000), ‘Psychoanalytic Perspectives on George Eliot’. Bernard J. Paris, who has been rereading Eliot from a psychoanalytic perspective, concludes simply that Gwendolen is an ‘overindulged narcissist’. Paris makes an interesting distinction, however, between rhetorical and mimetic narrative, arguing that beneath the formal structure of the novel is a portrayal of the characters’ inner life which may subvert or be in conflict with the formal theme. He argues that in Middlemarch and
Eliot is implying in the novel: Gwendolen’s task after Deronda is gone is to get to the root of her trauma and exorcise her demons if she wishes to survive.

How much does Deronda know? Gwendolen resolves to tell him ‘the exact truth’, concluding her confession with the words: ‘That was what happened. That was what I did. You know it all’ (pp. 757, 761). He certainly knows the adult Gwendolen better than anyone else does, perhaps better than she knows herself. He recognises, however, that she is capable of concealing the source of her deepest emotions: ‘He wondered at the force that dwelt in this creature, so alive to dread; for he had an irresistible impression that even under the effects of a severe physical shock she was mastering herself with a determination of concealment’ (p. 752). He wonders whether her state of ‘delirium’ after the drowning is related to her ‘necessity for self-repression’ (p. 754). Is he still suspicious of her? Gwendolen is obviously attracted to Deronda, perhaps because he makes no sexual demands on her. She seems to trust him, but fears that he will not be able to ‘bear with’ her when she tells him ‘everything’ (p. 755). When he urges her to tell him ‘all you feel it is a relief to tell’, she senses that the words ‘widened his spiritual distance from her, and she felt it more difficult to speak’ (p. 759). In the end, all Gwendolen can say is that Deronda ‘saved me from worse’. The gulf between them is too great: ‘She was a banished soul – beholding a possible life which she had sinned herself away from’ (p. 767).

Deronda confidently asserts that he is ‘the only creature who knew the real nature of Gwendolen’s trouble’ (p. 842). Whether one believes him depends on how one ‘reads’ Deronda. Is he the wise counsellor he appears to be or is he way out of his depth with Gwendolen? Is he truly concerned for her or is he scared off by her revelations? This article assumes that Eliot portrays Deronda with considerable irony, hinting at the pitfalls in his messianic self-perception, especially regarding women. Given this reading, his relationship to Gwendolen is complex and fraught with unconscious motivation. This raises an interesting question: does Deronda flee Gwendolen precisely because of her revelation of incest? Is Gwendolen acknowledging this when she says that ‘she had sinned herself away’ from a life with him? A knowledge of incest might help to explain

Daniel Deronda Eliot was led to deeper truths that she did not consciously comprehend (Rereading George Eliot (Albany, NY 2003) pp. 113–14). While I question his assertion about Eliot’s comprehension, Paris’s distinction supports the notion of the implied story, the narrative of the ‘unconscious,’ one could say, that flows through Gwendolen’s history.

why Deronda decides to marry Mirah, choosing a life of lofty purpose with a less ‘damaged’ woman. While readers might assume that Mirah is simply a better person than Gwendolen, Eliot seems to be implying that Gwendolen’s ‘woundedness’ is much more complex than Mirah’s. One need only contrast the rather static, conventional portrayal of Mirah with the fierce passions and ‘ragged edges’ of the Gwendolen story. Something terrible happened to Gwendolen, Eliot is saying, and no easy answers will do. The knowledge of incest might also explain why Deronda suggests to Hans that perhaps Gwendolen should not marry again (p. 871). After Deronda is gone, Gwendolen is still plagued by nightmares, waking up in ‘fits of shrieking’ (p. 879). ‘Take your fear as a safeguard’, was the advice of Deronda, who was convinced that ‘when we are calm we can use our memories and gradually change the bias of our fear’ (p. 509). But fear will not protect her if she cannot name its source and expiate her guilt. The conclusion of the novel gives scant evidence of transformation in Gwendolen. Despite her pledge to live and ‘be better’, her future appears bleak (pp. 878–9). This may be the final clue that Gwendolen’s wound goes deep indeed and cannot be resolved by any conventional happy ending.

Deronda’s advice to ‘take your fear as a safeguard’ is a significant interpolation in Eliot’s written text, supporting the argument that Gwendolen must recognise the source of her fear before she can move on in her life. See p. xx of Handley’s edition.