

A critical study of education as seen through George Eliot's *the mill on the floss* and *Daniel Deronda*

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George Eliot's interest in the subject of education and the effect that their educational backgrounds had on people's lives is reflected in many of her letters and essays, and it is very apparent in two of her novels, namely *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*. Although George Eliot's emphasis on particular types of education varies from the first novel to the second, she is consistent in the stress she places on the importance of sound training which is suitable for the character under consideration.

George Eliot is frequently described by her biographers as being mildly responsive to the social and political issues of her day. She did give 50 pounds to Girton College. On November 22, 1867 (her birthday) George Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell:

There is a shame on foot for a woman's college, or rather university, to be built between London and Cambridge, sharing its professors, examinations and degrees! (Letters, p. 58)

Only a few days before, on November 16, she wrote to Emily Davies, the primary force behind the establishment that became in 1869 Girton College, inviting her to call and discuss the founding of the new institution designed to offer higher education for women. On the same day (presumably ... the date of the letter is unknown) she wrote to Barbara Bodichon, a co-sponsor of the new college: 'I shall rejoice if this idea of a college can be carried out' (Ibid).

But many of her liberal contemporaries expected her to take a more active part in their various campaigns. George Eliot, however, knew that in the light of her unconventional liaison with George Henry Lewes, she would undoubtedly throw obloquy on any cause if she were to support it publicly. There can be no doubt that she felt strongly about equal education for women from her earliest years, but her convictions in this respect, as many others, found their most articulate expression in her novels. Her views on the educational opportunities for women, as well as her broader

perspective on the educational system in general, are clearly delineated in *The Mill on the Floss*, which had been published in 1860, some seven years before she received her call from Miss Davies.

In this paper, I would like to trace George Eliot's views on the education of women, along with the proper type of education that should be given to boys. Actually, the two subjects are closely related: if women (or girls) are to get equal education with men, then obviously, the quality of the education offered to men should be high, and the curriculum for both male and female students should be wisely adapted to their individual needs and talents. *The Mill on the Floss* is a sane and sensible analysis of what education really means.

In the novel, Mr. Tulliver is faced with a thorny problem: Tom, now about fifteen years old, is leaving an Academy because he is not satisfied with his progress there, and his father agrees with him. But where is he to be sent next? Mr. Tulliver, the least financially successful of the Dodson in-laws, is very eager to have his son educated to be a gentleman and a 'scollard'. He is not quite sure just what a gentleman or a 'scollard' is, but he thinks it must be a man who can speak standard English, wear fine clothes, and use in his conversation 'big' words that only important people can understand. In Mr. Tulliver's eyes, Tom must be a gentleman and a celebrity in the provincial world of St. Ogg's. But Tom's father has only the fuzziest notions, at best, of what constitutes good education. To be a gentleman, a boy must study Latin. On the other hand, Tom has to make a living and everybody knows that a man cannot earn a living by spouting Latin phrases to people who are not in the least bit interested. And this is then clearly expressed in *Daniel Deronda*.

Daniel Deronda is sent to Eton and then to Cambridge because his guardian, Sir Hugo Mallinger, wants him to have the education of an English gentleman and a 'pass-port in life'. A firm believer in traditional education, Sir Hugo also states that classical studies can lead to excessive narrowness:

Unless a man can get prestige and income of a Don and write donnish books, it's hardly worth while for him to make a Greek and Latin machine of himself... (I, XVI: 264).

In *The Mill on the Floss*, through Mr. Tulliver's dialogues with his wife about the course of Tom's schooling, and through Tom's experiences at school, George Eliot has proven herself to be a prophet of twentieth century trends in education. For one thing, Mr. Tulliver's concerns about Tom's education are made more acute by an embarrassing but incontrovertible fact: his daughter, Maggie, though several years younger than Tom, is obviously more intelligent than he. But that shouldn't be! Boys are supposed to be sharper than girls. And girls can't be educated. Tom is the one who must be educated, the only question being what he will study and where. Mr. Riley recommends Mr. Steeling, a clergyman who wishes to supplement his income by boarding and teaching a few boys at his vicarage, a vocation for which he has no formal training and little inclination. And here it must be noted that in *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot makes a strong case for the need for well-trained teachers.

In her account of Tom's formal schooling, George Eliot reveals her advanced views on the nature and scope of education for the emerging middle class. She shows quite simply but convincingly that education should be adapted to the individual's talents; tradition and snob appeal have no place in modern education. Latin and Greek are eminently suitable for those people who have a genuine interest in humanistic studies, whether or not they manage to put them to practical use. What Tom both wants and needs is what today we call vocational training courses. He is far less stupid when he is working with Mr. Deane doing the kind of work he really enjoys doing.

In *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot deals with this question of interest at a higher level. In the novel, Deronda's interest first becomes apparent at Eton. His intelligence is never questioned, but he fails to be an outstanding student because he will, or cannot, focus his energies on the 'fight for prize acquirement in narrow tracks' (I, XVI:265). The same situation continued, at increasing levels, at Cambridge where he felt a heightening discontent with the wearing futility and enfeebling strains of a demand for excessive retention and dexterity without any insight into the principle which forms the vital connections of knowledge. (I, XVI: 268-69).

In a typical ironical aside to the reader on what she has just said about Deronda's problem at Cambridge, George Eliot continues: 'Deronda's undergraduateship occurred fifteen years ago, when the perfection of our university methods was not yet indisputable' (L, XVI: 269).

After Deronda's return to England, following a period of study and travel on the Continent, he meets Mirah Lapidoth and her scholarly brother, Mordecai Cohen. Because of this interest in Mordecai's study of Jewish history, he starts to learn Hebrew. The next great change in Deronda's life appears when his mother, Leonora Halm-Eberstein, tells him that he is of Jewish parentage. He is particularly struck by the fact that his grand-father, Daniel Charisi, 'thought continually of our people's future' (III, IX: 274). With the knowledge of his true ancestry, the trunk of papers left by Charisi, and his growing love for Mirah, Deronda feels a great interest in fulfilling the consumptive Mordecai's wish that Deronda carries on this work. At the close of the novel, Deronda tells Gwendolen Harleth his plans for the future, plans for which his independent study and travel have been useful preparation.

One must not suppose that George is deprecating Latin and Greek as subjects for modern study. She merely insists that all humanistic studies are intended for those who have the interest and the intelligence to probe beyond the bookkeeper's ledger with its strict accounting of profit and loss. Further, she insists that those who are attracted to the realms of thought must of necessity include girls and women. Mr. Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, though he fears Latin, might not provide Tom with a decent livelihood, nevertheless he considers it a masculine subject. Books are for men: the kitchen and the bedroom are for women, the latter room being the only one in which the two sexes share a common interest.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, as far as George Eliot's treatment of Maggie's formal education is concerned, the novelist as we can well imagine devotes very little space to her heroine's career as a pupil. We noted above that her father gave scant regard to the education of a girl, however capable she may be. He laments to Mr. Riley:

She understands what one's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read straight off as if she knowed it all beforehand. And always at her book. But it's bad. A woman's no business Wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I think (I, ch.3, 82).

Nevertheless, Maggie is sent to Miss Firniss's boarding school, an establishment which occupies the reader's attention for only a few pages: Maggie is soon withdrawn when her father suffers financial ruin. We are only told that Maggie had formerly promised to kiss Tom when next she saw him, as 'a young lady who had been at boarding school she knew that such a greeting was out of the question...' Maggie was a genuine intellectual, not a blue stocking, but a young girl who was fired with an insatiable quest for knowledge. Nor did she equate knowledge with advancement in the world of commerce. George Eliot says of her: '... she wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and, in understanding, endure the heavy weight that had fallen on a young heart' (I, 3:83).

Maggie's intellectual and moral development can be traced through the books she reads on her own, not as school assignments. The two chapters devoted to her visits to Tom at King's Lorton deserve careful study. Tom as we know, is completely antipathetic to all school books. But Maggie, who was then about twelve years old, is wildly excited by Tom's Latin books and other items that she doesn't know the meaning of these books, she flings at him a true scholar's retort: 'But I could soon find out ... I should look inside and see what it was about.' (I, 3:85).

These two chapters on Maggie's visits to Tom stress the deplorable fact valuable time and effort is wasted on the education of those who do not care to learn what they are being taught whereas those who have both the intelligence and the desire to be educated in the humanities are either denied all educational opportunities because of their sex, or are shunted off to boarding schools where their time and talents are frittered away in a ridiculous attempt to make ladies of merchant's daughters.

Maggie's real encounter with books and their application to life comes when she reads *The Imitation of Christ* by THOMAS A Kempis. *The Imitation* is just what she needs in the dark days been taught 'real learning and wisdom', she could now hold the 'secret of life'. It is at this moment of deepest despair that Maggie happens to pick up *The Imitation* from the heap of books Bob Jakins had brought to her. Far removed from school assignments, Maggie finds at last what she is looking for, i.e. a book full of wisdom, true wisdom that tells us in an incomparably beautiful prose what life is all about. After reading a paragraph,

'Maggie drew a long breath and pushed her heavy hair back, as if to see a sudden vision more clearly'. George Eliot adds:

Here, then, was a secret of life ... here was insight, and strength and conquest to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard. (I, 6 : 107)

One can't help thinking that George Eliot, as well as many of her readers, is observing that it is an unfortunate commentary on society that a girl (a boy, too, for that matter) could not have been introduced to this priceless wisdom in a classroom presided over by a competent teacher who could have it in his or her power to make viable the word education, a word that must apply to girls as well as boys.

Although her family is not aristocratic, Gwendolen Harleth, in *Daniel Deronda*, grew up in a sheltered and privileged environment. Perhaps the clearest picture of Gwendolen early in the novel comes from Eliot's description:

With regard to much in her lot hitherto, she had held herself rather hardly dealt with, but as to her 'education' she could have admitted that it left her under no disadvantages. In the school-room her quick mind had taken readily that strong starch of unexplained rules and disconnected facts which saves ignorance from any painful sense of limpress; and what remained of all things knowable, she was conscious of being sufficiently acquainted with through novels, plays, and poems. About her French and music, the two justifying accomplishments of a young lady, she felt no ground for uneasiness... (I, V: 54).

Gwendolen feels herself 'hardly dealt with', but she is the most pampered member of her family. The use of 'quick' to describe her mind is ironic; she can master the sort of information which Deronda found tiresome in school, but the shallowness implied here is obvious. Much of her acquaintance with life has come through reading instead of experience. George Eliot would condemn the idea that music and French could be 'justifying accomplishments' for anyone. Even Gwendolen's musical abilities, in which she places so much confidence, later prove to be a bitter disappointment.

Deronda occasionally meets Gwendolen socially, and she learns to enjoy asking him for advice. George Eliot says, 'Those who trust us educate us. And perhaps in that ideal consecration of Gwendolen some education was being prepared for Deronda' (II, XXXV : 236). He does learn something about the importance of human relationships and the necessity of feeling a sense of purpose in life, and he suggests, 'Some real knowledge

would give you an interest in the world beyond the small drama of your personal desires' (II, XXXVI : 265). Gwendolen took to her room a selection of books, 'Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Butler, Burke, Guizot ... hoping that by dipping into them all in succession, with her rapid understanding she might get a point of view nearer his level' (III, XLIV:4). Naturally, Gwendolen finds no time to pursue her studies.

The other women who were major influences on Deronda's life received educations very different from Gwendolen's. His father, Leonora Halm-Eberstein, tells him that her scholarly, but narrow-minded father tried to form her according to her concept of 'the Jewish woman' (III, L I:123). She rebelled rejecting him and her heritage; her only satisfaction in life came from her musical training and her life as a famous singer. Mirah Lapidoth's education was the most haphazard of that of any major character in *Daniel Deronda*. One of the few good things that can be said of her thoroughly unpleasant father is that he made an effort to educate his daughter. Much of Mirah's education was in connection with her roles on the stage, which began when she was nine. Her reading, unlike Gwendolen, was a strong positive influence on her life. In describing her early reading, she states, 'I gathered thoughts very fast, because I read many things, plays and poetry, Shakespeare and Schiller, and learned good and evil' (I, XIX:284). Although she did not pursue a stage career, she did learn to use her musical training profitably.

Despite the fact that Mirah's brother, Mordecai Cohen, sometimes gets carried away by his enthusiasm, George Eliot presents him very favourably as a character. He is a religious scholar who has a dream for the future of his people and is driven by the need to pass on his knowledge and aspirations to others. Unlike some scholars in George Eliot's other novels, Mordecai is not pompous or condescending, and is genuinely kind. Unlike Charisi, Mordecai doesn't insist that others measure up to his own level of dedication. Even *Daniel Deronda*, his chosen successor, has an opportunity to refuse.

If in *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot insists on the fact that education is for boys as well as girls, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot points out that no one sort of

education is suitable for everyone: it should be appropriate to the student's abilities and goals in life. She has, in fact, a twentieth century outlook in this respect. George Eliot doesn't condemn such studies as the classics and music, provided that they are well taught and that the student has the necessary interest and ability. However, she stresses that education should help the student to gain some understanding of the world and to fulfil his or her role in it. Education should not be limited to a few years of formal schooling. Eliot wrote to Sara Sophia Hennell in 1847, 'I think 'live and teach' should be a proverb as well as 'live and learn' ' (Letters, I:242).

Each of the major characters in *Daniel Deronda* is strongly influenced by his or her early training. Gwendolen's education and her mother's indulgence prepared her to fit into only one niche in society; she was unwilling, and probably unable to adapt to any other sort of life. Deronda's mother was well prepared as a professional singer, but her life was otherwise empty. Mirah and Mordecai, largely through their own efforts, acquired knowledge which enable them to appreciate others, to make a contribution to society, and earn money. Both were disappointed that they were not able to fulfill their highest ambitions, but they learned to adapt to reality. Deronda found his life's work far outside that which might have been expected of a former Cambridge student. In fact, the biggest difference between Deronda, Mirah and Mordecai and the characters such as Leonora and Gwendolen is that the former, like their author, had the flexibility to continue learning and share their interest with others. □

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