Title of Paper: **Transgression in Daniel Deronda (1876)**
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Abstract: This article explores transgression in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. It defines transgression in literature, focuses on its manifestations in the novel, and links it to the depiction of Gwendolen's emotional and sexual dysfunction. It argues that transgression is a method by which Eliot advances women's writings, and is manifested in the novel's conception and the new terrains Eliot is probing. The exigencies of reception and reading in the context of transgression are another dimension this article expounds. In the last part, I use trauma theories to evidence my argument about Gwendolen as an incest victim, an argument which is, in its turn, an exemplification of a transgressive reading of the novel.

Keywords: Transgression, incest; trauma; feminist approach to literature; resistance.

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'As if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, “I am a woman’s life”' (Daniel Deronda).

The plea made by Lydia Glasher near the Whispering Stones has invoked a gruesome dream-vision in Gwendolen Harleth’s mind. It has cast a bleak shadow over the developing of events in the novel and the prospects of Gwendolen’s marriage to Grandcourt, literally a French compound noun meaning big court. He is the embodiment of evil beyond reason. To resist, let alone to contain him is, by the same token, beyond reason. What Gwendolen has failed to see, and has not accepted as part of her marriage deal is that titles and money come with a price; the price is her own freedom and dignity. Grandcourt symbolises the status quo that both women have to reckon with regardless of their inner revolts and unvoiced resistance. Their anger is self-destructive because his figure is a constant reminder of relations of power and subordination. Despite their intellectual and economic frailty, female characters nourish natural transgressive energies as an oppressed group. I see transgression as a method by which Eliot advances women’s writing, especially through her most sophisticated psychological probing of Gwendolen. This article sets out to study transgression in Daniel Deronda, and argues that Eliot is transgressing and in doing so challenging Victorian society’s gender norms and views on women. Central to my thesis is Gwendolen’s sexual and emotional dysfunction and the dramatisation of that in the novel. The article will show how Eliot succeeds in essaying new narrative terrains by fully probing ‘the unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an exploration of our guts and storms’.1

1 Eliot, George, Daniel Deronda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 235. Future references will be made to this edition and included in parentheses within the text, prefaced by ‘DD’.
The author's own life can be seen as a stark violation of Victorian social norms. At a time when extra-marital relations were condemned, Eliot was living with an already-married man who could not divorce his wife and marry her. She insisted on calling herself Mrs. Lewes and treating her relationship with her partner as a marriage. Gillian Beer states, ‘Antigone like George Eliot is a law-breaker with a profound respect of law’. The first part of this article will define transgression in literature and contend that in Daniel Deronda, Eliot intentionally unsettles the omniscient narrator’s knowledge. Notwithstanding Eliot’s innovative approach to the delineation of female characters, it is my contention to demonstrate that in her last work of fiction she tested the boundaries of novel writing and, in terms of charting the female psyche, crossed over into uncharted territory. I will be studying Gwendolen’s psyche in an attempt to unveil the enigma behind her hysterical fits and murderous wishes in the second part of this work. The narrator exposes, in the construction of Gwendolen’s character, the limitations of language in conveying what the protagonist is enduring. The pain is beyond conventional representation, and for this reason, I will be using trauma theories to unravel Gwendolen’s hidden secret as a transgressive vein that throbs across the novel.

Transgression is necessary and foundational in the process of writing and testing the limits of literary genres. The Oxford English Dictionary states that transgression is a breaking “of the law or a command”, trespassing, offending, or going beyond limits. In literature, transgression is not only central to the experience of writing and reading, but a necessary strategy to fight stagnation and monotony, in other words, death. At the heart of artistic creation, there is a combat and a continuous attempt to test the boundaries and the laws of literary genres. The act of writing defeats death as it reproduces life and opens a text to an unlimited train of associations. Maurice Blanchot’s definition of transgression

in literature and its intrinsic link to criticism is the most relevant to the argument I shall be developing. For him, criticism is no longer conceived as ‘le jugement exterieur qui met l’ouvrage litteraire en valeur’. The reading act generates from the oeuvre insofar as it resurrects its myriad lives; it is ‘sa propere recherche, et l’experience de sa possibilite’.\(^3\) He analogises the act of reading to resurrection as it plumbs the depths of a work of art and resuscitates it from the recesses of the written text. In the process of writing and reading, transgression is “l’atteinte de l’inaccessible, le franchissement de l’infranchissabe” whereby power stops to be “la dimension ultime”.\(^4\) The task of reading has no limits as it transcends power; it is much more challenging during Victorian times. Eliot’s contemporary critics experienced in their reading of the novel its difference and foreignness. They saw its resistance to appropriation and its experimental nature. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot is inviting her readers, as she depicts Jewish characters, Judaism, and her protagonist, to look transgression in the eye.

*Daniel Deronda* transgresses the prevailing Victorian norms on race and racial superiority. The novel - structured on the progress of two plots that run parallel - weaves Zionism into its fabric by making it central in Deronda’s identity quest. The use of Zionism as the major moral force creates the condition of possibility for the protagonist to flee his boring and meaningless life to a much more fulfilling one when he discovers his Jewish origins. The thematic move from the English scene and the inclusion of a Jewish story running parallel with that of Gwendolen has caused, according to critics, a ‘narrative disjunction’. Perhaps the most notorious statement on the novel was made by F. R. Leavis.

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when he advised that ‘the bad Jewish part should be cut away, and Gwendolen Harleth published as a separate work’. Daniel Deronda was criticised when it was first published on the basis of its Zionist aspirations, the foreignness of its Jewish characters, and themes. Eliot was aware of the criticism Daniel Deronda could face because of its Jewish element. She expected the negative reaction of critics and readers. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe she wrote:

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 the 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 it.6

Eliot expressed her dissatisfaction with the way readers and critics tried to cut the novel in two parts. Henry James in ‘Daniel Deronda: A Conversation’, states that ‘Gwendolen is a masterpiece’, and sees the Jewish characters as ‘shadows’ lacking any human traits. His exasperation with the Jewish characters and themes was only a sample of the Gentile negative response to the book. In this article, he sees the English part of the book as a success and its Jewish part as a failure. Contrariwise, the Jewish critics adopted a different view. James Picciotto in his review, ‘Deronda the Jew’, thought that Eliot’s depiction of Jewish

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The Victorian characters is real and the novel succeeded in subverting established images of the Jew as ‘a swindling financier’ and ‘a money-lender’. The criticism waged against the Jewish part of the novel among the English critics is in stark contrast with that of the Jewish critics. From a Jewish standpoint, the book was seen as a milestone in the history of literary representations of Jewish characters in English literature. The reaction of her reading public and critics depicted a strong anti-Semitic feeling and created resistance to her attempts to fight racial prejudices. The Jewish characters are incorporated in the narrative as part and parcel of its emotional and humane affiliations with the suffering of the Other. Art for Eliot has to be real and the concept of the real is both aesthetic and moral. Realism, the backbone of her theory of art, should undermine, question, transgress and contribute to social and political change.

Writers transgress because they fear death, they fear to be frozen by conventions and norms. The normative has to be challenged through innovation and originality. Eliot - and this is long before modern and contemporary theorists of fiction - maintains that the most appropriate genre for women writers is fiction. She perceives it as a free genre that ‘may take any form, and yet be beautiful’. The novel – a hybrid genre - generates its own rules because it has no ‘rigid laws’. Arguably, Eliot is aware of the novel’s empowering energy to contest its premises and create new forms because of its hybridity that lies in its flexibility. ‘[N]o educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements. Like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful’.

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Tzvetan Todorov sees transgression of genres as constructive and instrumental in literary creation. Transgression, for creators and pioneers, is required by the law it is going to violate: ‘the transgression requires a law – precisely the one that is violated. We might even go further to observe that the norm becomes visible – comes into existence – owing only to its transgression’.

Exceptional works show the limitations of genres: ‘[O]ne has to think that every time, in these exceptional works where a limit is reached, the exception alone is what reveals to us that ‘law’ which it also constitutes the unexpected and necessary deviation’. In *Daniel Deronda* runs a transgressive vein from its opening to its finale. With reference to its historical setting, it is the closest to Eliot’s own time. The novel’s main events take place in 1865. It opens in *medias res* as the narrator contemplates the concept of a beginning in fiction. The narrative starts in the middle when the two protagonists of the novel, Daniel Deronda, the title hero, and Gwendolen meet in a German spa but do not get to know each other because Gwendolen has to rush back home. Chronologically, their encounter takes place at a relatively developed stage and the narrator moves backward to relate the previous events. What is called the make-believe in the epigraph is an imaginary starting point invented by creators in art and science. The meeting that has taken place between the two major characters of the novel fulfils a crucial structural function whereby the two parts of the novel are connected. In other words, transgression is at the heart of the artistic production. It is a necessary temporal and spatial manoeuvring to accommodate the relating of the story.

Eliot starts her novel with a series of questions that introduce Gwendolen. Those questions will remain unanswered throughout and readers and critics alike should make their own interpretations and inferences. *Daniel Deronda* breaks away from Eliot’s English setting to an international scene where

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characters’ inner sense of loss and disillusionment is accentuated by the vagaries of life. The author is ‘the narrator of human action’ and his/her mission: ‘would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moment of intense suffering’ (DD, 139). This statement underlines the purposeful psychological study of the female protagonist’s actions and reactions that Eliot undertakes in the novel. She focuses on Gwendolen’s agony and refrains from giving direct answers and explanations. This helps Eliot evade her usual classical finales and paves the way for a new ending that suggests a reinstatement of the medias res as the only plausible way to start and end a narrative. The uncertainty of Gwendolen’s struggle to overcome her hysterical outbursts and the perilous journey of Daniel Deronda to the Holy Land underscore the novel’s transgressive nature, which questions the possibility of happy endings.

Victorian literature is characterised by almost an obsessive interest in moral values and their impact on preserving social order and status quo. The person who transgresses is punished socially by becoming an outcast and physically or mentally by insomnia or cancer. The marginalisation of the transgressive self in Victorian fiction serves paradoxically to reinforce the norms. In The Power of Lies, Kucich argues that ‘the ostensibly truthful cultured addiction to lies, deceit, mendacity and all other aspects of representations of the morally degenerate in the Victorian novel - seen as deviations - and the particular trick of repudiation and appropriation played a central role in establishing its historical importance and lasting power’. He acknowledges the specificities of female writings and argues that their problematic position is the result of their gendered position as Other; a woman is in her very existence a ‘transgressive exceptionality’ against the normative male self.12 Lydia, a symbol with strong semantic dimensions in the novel, rehearses the grave consequences

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of transgressing Victorian norms. The shades of brown and dark that shroud her rare appearances in *Daniel Deronda* seemingly condemn her social deviation. Her adumbration intensifies the nature of her moral transgression as a metonymy for vice. The reclusive setting where she lives with her children is an indication of her position as an outcast. Eliot is underlining the gendered nature of morality as it resides in women’s chastity.

The sketchy representation of Lydia functions as a viable introduction to explore the novel’s protagonist. Her humiliation, as she pleads her case to Gwendolyn, sheds light on women’s conditions. The lack of female vocation in Victorian England and the illegality of divorce are compounded by her status as a mother of four illegitimate children. She appears near the Whispering Stones as an omen foreshadowing the doomed marriage of the protagonist and the sudden and violent death of her ex-lover. Her own suffering and that of her four kids is Gwendolen’s living curse. The authorial power seems to be Eliot’s ultimate recourse to rescue Lydia and Gwendolyn by just drowning Grandcourt at sea. Lydia haunts the narrative as a tormented spirit. Women were persistently constructed as morally inconsistent and essentially dangerous during the nineteenth century: ‘no century depicted woman as vampire, as castrator, as killer so consistently, so programmatically, and so nakedly as the nineteenth century.’

Commenting on eighteenth and nineteenth century female writers, Patricia Meyer Spacks states that the act of writing for women writers was simply a significant act of survival. She affirms that the expression of the self accompanies the struggle to be a self. Women master their life experiences through writing. They can even transform passivity, self-denial, and resignation

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into a kind of heroism. Gilbert and Gubar argue in their influential The Mad Woman in the Attic that the mad woman is the author’s own image: ‘an image of her own anxiety and rage’. They tie in with the basic premise of a feminist reading of pioneering female writers of the Victorian era, yet introduce new insights into the problematic concept of female authorship. Gilbert and Gubar use the pen/penis metaphor to describe the relationship men writers have with their literary production. The image of the God father, the creator, is as well - employed to underline masculinity as prerequisite to artistic creation. Their central thesis about the relationship of women and writing is predicated on the female author’s struggle to go beyond her society’s gender ideology and free herself from the angel/whore paradigm. The female writing self has to reconcile herself to writing and publishing as a male preserve because of a long-held belief in western culture that ‘writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to female characteristics’. Writing for publication was an open act of aggression because it entailed social exposure, scrutiny and even shame and ridicule. In the same vein, Mary Poovey argues that the act of writing during the nineteenth century was ‘unladylike’ because ‘it was considered self-assertive’. Speaking about the female writer, she states that ‘the inhibitions visible in her writing constitute a record of her historical oppression, so the work itself proclaims her momentary, possibly unconscious, but effective defiance’. It is an act of aggression against the domestic ideals of maternal love, chastity, and purity as celebrated in Coventry Patmore’s the Angel in the House and embodied by Honoria. The binary opposition that differentiates men from women, the


public from the domestic, and the whore from the virgin are a contested domain where transgression operates.\textsuperscript{16}

In \textit{Transgressing the Modern}, Jervis affirms that there are no clear boundaries between the masculine and feminine. The female Other is grounded in the concept of transgression as a process of crossing boundaries and violating norms whilst upholding them as necessary in the functioning of social order and status quo. The expansion of Britain abroad and the new territories and races that became part of the Empire triggered, in part, the Victorian’s fascination and even obsession with studying women and other ‘inferior’ races. The essentially female in women is always menacing and lascivious and should be controlled whilst male attributes are positive and complementary and should be solidified.\textsuperscript{17} Gwendolen’s character foregrounds an engagement with Victorian female ideals and her suffering as a child and an adult destabilises Victorian moral views and norms. The virgin/whore, victim/murderess, and free/captive are opposing poles that merge as one in Gwendolen’s character. She is Eliot’s major contribution to the psychological study of characters in fiction. The novel goes deeper into unchartered areas of the psyche and the working of the human mind.

Chris Jenks states that transgression is a concept that consists of a ‘series of continua, both vertical and horizontal, such as sacred-profane; good-evil; normal-pathological’; they are not opposites but should be treated as ‘stratifications’ operating despite their differences to construct identities.\textsuperscript{18}


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Though people tend to see transgressions as clear cuts between borders and contexts in time and space, the term is much more sophisticated and complex as it accommodates and acts as contradictions and oppositions. Right from the beginning Gwendolen is identified with Neried, the protector of sailors during storms, and then compared to Lamia, the woman serpent. In many instances she is analogised to St. Cecilia and Madonna Pia, which invites readers to see the conflicting aspects of her character and its complexity. In another instance, she is referred to as Diana/Artemis, a destructive and protective Goddess that inflicts pain and averts evil. She is never conquered by love and severely punishes those who transgress chastity. La Madonna Pia de Tolomei’s tragic death due to her captivity in the morbid landscape of Maremma and the pestilential air is evocative. Similarly, Grandcourt’s jealousy makes him decide to sail despite the sailors’ warning of a forthcoming storm. The dissolute background that Gwendolen visits is a clear reminder of la Madonna Pia’s fate and its implications on her atonement. Despite her unscrupulous decision to marry Lydia’s lover and the father of her children, Gwendolen is a redeemable character. La Madonna Pia is transformed through her suffering in the hands of her husband into a symbol of redemption, and is idealised in the minds of people and immortalised in one of the most moving four verses of Dante’s *Purgatory*. Her invocation bolsters the recurrent comparative dimensions as instrumental motifs in the structuring of the novel. They form a deep undercurrent against what Gwendolen’s calls her ‘wickedness’ and a clear indication of her high moral ground and future redemption.

The novel’s pathos lies in the life of Gwendolen before and after she marries Grandcourt. Marriage enables her to flee poverty after the loss of her family money in a financial venture. She thought that any prospective husband might be her slave exactly in the same way she enjoyed her life with her mother and half-sisters. She even wanted to ‘go to be a queen in the East like Lady Hester Stanhope’ (DD, 62). Instead she marries Grandcourt and becomes one of his
possessions. The power he has over her is that of a master over his slave: ‘he wanted to feel [...] that she was his to do as he liked with, and to make her feel it so’ (DD, 622). She is within the spectrum of ‘his narrow immovable gaze, as if she were part of the complete yacht’ (DD, 625). Her helplessness to resist his ‘intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive’ (DD, 626) is internalised into feeling of ‘embitterment hatred’ (DD, 626) and vengeance. His ‘intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive after this fashion’ suggests her enslavement within that marriage. Though short lived, the marriage is tense and very frustrating. She has almost lost her senses and verges on madness because of his continuous gaze and control. Gwendolen had thought that people allow themselves to be slaves and she learned through her painful marriage that sometimes social constraints are stronger than the human will. Women are educated to be subordinated to men like slaves are to their masters. His ‘empire of fear’ (DD, 395) is only countered by her submission and silence as he is fully aware that ‘[S]he was under his power’ (DD, 624).

Her marriage ended with the death of her husband during their trip to Italy. Gilbert and Gubar correctly conclude that the author’s awareness of her gender identity ‘recruits the power of Nemesis to destroy male oppressors. Narrative violence underscores the author’s ‘defensive reactions to transgressive emotions’.19 Many critics have paid attention to Gwedolen’s murderous wishes and hysterical fits. In “Logicized” Taboo’, Horatschek centres her argument on the mirror scene when Gwendolen fails to recognise the face that appears in the mirror next to her image. She claims that ‘we are left in the dark as to the origin of this picture during the entire novel’. To solve the puzzle of Gwendolen’s state of mind she applies psychoanalysis and refers to Kristeva’s theory of the chora.20

19 Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 477-490, 513.
The reading is erroneous because the novel is replete with references to Gwendolen’s source of pain and dread. The author selects carefully her words to construct her character as one that speaks ‘with an inward voice of desperate self-repulsion’ (DD, 590) and is ‘submerged by the weight of memory which no words could represent’ (DD, 596).

Incest provides a powerful explanation for Gwendolen’s neurosis and hysteria. This deep wound is explored whilst probing Gwendolen’s psyche and her murderous wishes. I contend it offers a convincing answer to her agony, corroborates the author’s own transgressive agenda, and endeavours to expose - and in exposing, it condemns women’s disempowerment. Incest is the root of Gwendolen’s murderous wishes. Incest and murder are bound up with the development of Gwendolen’s plot. Book One, entitled ‘The Spoiled Child’, dramatises Gwendolen Harleth’s story. The opening paragraph consists of a set of questions that cross Daniel Deronda’s mind when he sees Gwendolen around the roulette table gambling in a casino in Leubronn. The story is half-told because her narrative starts in the middle and goes back only to raise suspicion about her past and her relationship with her step-father. The narrator never explains why Captain Davilow left? Why does she still harbour murderous hatred toward him and feel his suffocating presence despite his death? Why does his face surface in moment of crisis to merge with that of her husband? How did he die? When read carefully, the novel offers convincing answers to her hysterical fits and the ‘moment of madness’ on her wedding night. Chapter Three and the confessions she makes to Daniel Deronda as the novel draws to a close make incest and sexual assault a genuine possibility in light of which the intricacies of her psyche can be illuminated. The narrator informs us that Gwendolen’s father died when ‘his little daughter was in long clothes’ and ‘the unlovable step father whom she had been acquainted with the greater part of her life while her frocks were short’ replaced him in her life. The comments of the narrator are followed by a short and telling conversation between Gwendolen and her mother. She is
blaming her mother for marrying a thief and scoundrel who stole her gems and ran away a few years ago. The uncharacteristic violent and abrupt reaction of the meek Mrs. Davilow suggests her feelings of guilt and self-reproach. The narrator then moves to speak about Gwendolen’s eccentric behaviour and the strangling of her sister’s bird. Isabel who has ‘an alarming memory’ opens a panel that contains ‘things that meant to be shut up’ among those things ‘a picture of a dead upturned face with a creature that seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms’ (DD, 20). No explanation is given about the dead face and the fleeing creature. This body of evidence helps readers infer, especially after the death of her husband and the confession she makes to Daniel, that incest cannot be discarded as a viable reason for her excessive pain.

The language used to introduce Gwendolen to the readers is heavy with sexual innuendo. She refers to Gwendolen’s ‘negative beginning in adult life’ and how her mother ‘had always been in an apologetic state of mind for the evils brought on her by a step-father’ because she is weak and in her weakness she compromised the well-being of her child. Notwithstanding the ‘small bed in her mamma’s room’ (DD, 18), Mrs. Davilow was too weak to stand against her husband. Her ‘timid maternal conscience’ makes her nervous whenever the subject of her husband is approached. Mr. Gascoigne states that Captain Davilow put ‘Gwendolen at a disadvantage’ by ‘keeping her in the shade’ (DD, 29). As a result of her ‘spoiled’ childhood, Gwendolen sees herself as ‘a specimen of a lower order’ or ‘one of an insect swarm’ and feels wicked and evil (DD, 6).

Textual references to Gwendolen’s childhood make incest a sustainable explanation to understand her insecurity, self-loathing, and fear. Her relationship with her mother, albeit close, is tense and has more to it than the text discloses. Gwendolen, whenever possible, holds her mother responsible for her suffering. What Gwendolen endured has never been named; nonetheless, her mother is guilty of marrying a wicked man and failing to protect her daughter. After the
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drowning of her husband, Gwendolen suffers a nervous breakdown. Her marriage has initiated her regression to childhood and the death of Grandcourt has caused her mental collapse. When she meets Daniel in her hotel room, her speech is disjointed and her sentences are discontinued. She seems to speak from the depth of her past and childhood's memories. What she conveys in a 'fragmentary way' reflects her psychological distress and confusion. Those disconnected utterances are intervalled by 'silence', 'tears', sinking voice', 'whispering' and 'sobbing', 'quivering lips' and 'tremor' the narrator informs us. (DD, 542-43). In describing the scene of her husband’s death, she mentions two recurrent objects of significant symbolic implications in the narrative: the key and the knife. She describes the knife as attractive and tempting; this 'beautiful' and lethal tool is 'small sharp, like a long yellow leaf in a silver sheath'. Gwendolen's attraction to the knife is triggered by her longing to kill: 'I wanted to kill - it was as strong as thirst [...] and it came', the beautiful toy 'in the cabinet in her boudoir' is locked away by a key she intentionally throws in the water in order to keep it out of reach (DD, 592). I perceive the key as a dual symbol, standing for the lost combat with her tormenting past, a past that she fails to put aside and move on. I read the knife - in itself a phallic symbol and locked away in a cabinet - as a trace of the incest that scars her being. Her failure consists of her constant murderous wishes that remain strong and compelling even after the death of her husband. In my view, the fact that she is still seeing her stepfather's face and wishing his death, after his death, bears witness to her failure to dislodge his memory out of her mind. The past is still haunting her and plaguing her present and future life.

I want to tell you what it was that came over me in that boat. 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 [...] 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 (DD, 596).

Killing for Gwendolen is fuelled by hatred that ‘was always working like an evil spirit’ (DD, 591). What Deronda describes as ‘the tremor’, and ‘the child-like beseeching’ that come from ‘quivering lips’ testifies to *peccatum illud horribile, inter christiances non nominandum*. The quote from Shelley's poem about incest, *The Cenci*, is significantly illuminating because Gwendolen's sleepless nights, disturbing dreams, and hysterical sobbing intensify as the novel progresses towards its end. This bolsters my argument that the protagonist's horrific past rather than her unhappy marriage is behind her agony. At a developed stage of the composition, her dead husband and the dead stepfather merge as one and their presence is reduced to moments of extreme pain and violence. The face of Captain Davilow that surfaces on the water during the drowning of Grandcourt is a reminder of a past Gwendolen is still struggling to forget. Then she goes back to her childhood when she wished her stepfather to stay away or for her to sail away ‘where people were not forced to live with any one they did not like’. When she is confiding to Daniel, the narrator informs us that what she is telling seems to ‘nullify time’. In moment of crisis Gwendolen mind’s is so disoriented that her past, in the form of her stepfather, is more present than her present. The quote demonstrates how the death of her husband takes her back in time where her only dream was and still is to stop past memories plaguing her life. Her past seems to come back; ‘it came – it came’ as a ghost or an evil spirit that haunts her days and nights. As the novel nears its end, a repeated set of motifs namely the key, the dead face and the knife are introduced to help readers understand the reasons behind Gwendolen's ‘unreasonable’ behaviour. The quote Eliot chooses from Shelley is supported by an injection of symbolic and metaphoric textual evidence.
Gwendolen’s story is conspicuously told through its powerful absence; her fear of the night, murderous wishes, and her stepfather’s face are explicitly unaccounted for in the text. Her past is literally circumcised from the narrative and never recovered. Penner claims that her past is revived in moments of crisis and extreme emotional excitement. In her article ‘Unmapped Country’, she concludes that incest is at the heart of Gwendolen’s story.21 Her tragic resignation to life at the end of the novel testifies to her failure to surmount the pain she was exposed to when she was a child. The abuse of Gwendolen by her stepfather Captain Davilow ‘runs like a sister stream through the narrative’, gathers force with the author striking force of words, images, repeated references’, argues Reimer in her article ‘The Spoiled Child’.22 Penner’s examination of the novel in light of hidden wounds, textual silences, and recovered memories underlines that the nature of spoiling is sexual. Her psychic wound is not translated in writing and her story should be read through its significant absence and silence. It may be said that Gwendolen’s silences speak to the fact that she has no collective memory or even language with which to tell her own story.23 Reimer expands on Penner’s reading of Gwendolen’s story and claims that the latter has failed to see that incest is the key to Gwendolen’s violent emotional outburst. She argues that Penner may be right at a literal level, for the word incest is not mentioned. This point is not necessarily sustainable because Penner, along with a few other critics before her, is amongst the first critics to explore Gwendolen’s story in light of abuse and sexual assault in a relatively lengthy article and solid argument.24


23 Penner, p. 78.

24 See for example Carol Stone in ‘George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda: The Case History of Gwendolen H’; and see Judith Wilt, “‘He Would Come Back’: The Fathers of Daughters in Daniel Deronda”.

Gwendolen’s plot is read in contrast to that of other female characters who are given enough space to speak about their past. Cynthia Chase’s argument is based on the thematic and structural use of circumcision. She claims that Deronda would certainly have known that he was Jewish, and that the disruption of the temporal sequence of the cause and effect is deconstructed in the narrative. Metalepsis, which characterises Deronda’s plot, can be extended to Gwendolen’s. Miller argues Daniel’s wound belongs to the ‘unnarratable’ – that cannot be narrated because it is taboo whilst Gwendolen’s plot pertains to the ‘nonnarratable’ that is incapable of generating a story. Unlike Deronda’s plot which comes to an end with the discovery of his Jewish origins and departure to Palestine, Gwendolen’s story has to be removed from the text because it fails to be uttered in words. Penner argues that Gwendolen’s past forms a significant layer in her mind that keeps coming to her present life. The text reflects the functioning of the mind in repressing the past by relegating it to a deeper layer of memory and eventually banishing it from the text. Foucault offers a compelling elucidation to the articulation of the ‘forbidden’ in the ‘order of speech, he states that:

One must not talk about what is forbidden until it is annulled in reality; what is inexistent has no right to show itself, even in the order of speech where its inexistence is declared; and which one must keep silent about is banished from reality as the thing that is tabooed about all.


The absence of the presence and the elliptical based interpretation in reading the text no longer hold as the only relevant explanation to Gwendolen’s agony. The claims that the story of Gwendolen has to be truncated at first and ultimately purged of the narrative cannot stand unchallenged. Reimer has convincingly argued that Eliot could not have shied away from mentioning incest as the reason behind Gwendolen’s dysfunction. She illustrates her claim with evidence from Eliot’s time and how the subject is broached in many ways in Victorian times. Reimer argues that it is our own reading habits that make it difficult to see the obvious.²⁸ We are too much used to the literal to understand the metaphoric and symbolic layers of the text. Nancy Henry gathers many textual evidences, including the Italian setting, the motto of the chapter, and correctly states that ‘Gwendolen’s character is shaped by the secret only she knows’.²⁹ My contention, however, is that the transgressive nature of the character and the text makes the writing and reading task transgressive. In her last work of fiction, Eliot questions and in questioning undermines many aspects of the classic realist text and Victorian norms. This was done in many of her novels, but it is the most conspicuous in Daniel Deronda. The character of Gwendolen, in my view, is evasive because it is depicted in conjunction with the idea of memory and the unrepresentability of the past. The narrator astutely draws the readers’ attention to the limitations and even failure of words in this respect by referring to ‘the weight of memory which no words could represent’ (DD, 596). For this reason, and in many instances, there is an intentional overlap between the narrator and the character’s comments. Through the use of free indirect speech and the undermining of the omniscient narrator technique, Eliot unsettles the borders between the narrator and the character. These malleable

²⁸ Reimer, p. 34.

shifts between the character and the narrator bear witness to the author’s awareness of the challenges in conveying Gwendolen’s thoughts, and the difficulty with establishing clear dividing lines between the narrator and the character. Between what Gwendolen endured as a child and the limitation of language yawns an unbridgeable gap. The tension between what the language can convey and what the character feels is at the heart of the traumatic experience of sexual abuse and the literary creation.

My argument ties up with the premises advanced by the above mentioned critics, yet introduces significant perspectives with relation to transgression and its manifestations in the novel. The quote from Shelley’s verse drama, Cenci, towards the end of the novel, her collapse after the death of her husband, and Chapter Three, amongst others, foreground the novel’s structural and thematic unity. The quote from Shelley is of revealing significance to the argument of my article and the theme of incest as a destructive force and a polluting presence in the character of Gwendolen and the work as a whole. It ponders the dangers of thoughts and their bearings on the mind. Giacomo, the brother of Beatrice, is struggling with his own fantasies as he harbours, as Gwendolen does, murderous wishes instigated primarily by his sister’s rape. The representations of the conscious of both Giacomo, and Gwendolen remain in essence dangerous because they are not translated into words and speech. They haunt and disturb both narratives. It is quite obvious that Eliot saw in Shelley a transgressive figure with a mind ‘attuned to reality but liberated from its strictures’. Eliot is as aware of the sinister side of Shelley’s thinking and her awareness helps in the fashioning of the protagonist’s inner thought and the stream of her emotional pouring. As in the case of Giacomo and Gwendolen, thoughts can be transformed into realities or perceived as realities by the disturbed mind. My intention is to

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30 Pinch, Adela, Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 163-64.
show how transgression in Gwendolen pertains to her past wound and her thoughts that never take shape. Her agency is of shadowy presence in her mind as her resistance is an internal matter and both have no real consequences. This can be sustained by her mental deterioration and her deluded belief in the power of her thinking, So much so she projects her inner thoughts of killing her husband on the accident itself. This expression of guilt as she confides to Deronda in the hotel after the perishing of her husband underscores the danger of her thoughts to her. They are, in moments of crises, her reality. This mental state of mind is, in my view, related to her sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather.

Gwendolen’s marriage to Grandcourt is painful. His sadism aggravates Gwendolen’s case. Her hysterical outbursts and cries are not only the result of forced sex. Marriage re-enacts wounds rooted in her past. Her sexual abuse invades her present and plunges her back into childhood. This aspect of her character resists language and so representation. The figure of Deronda comes quite close to that of a counsellor or psychiatrist, rather than a priest, as he listens to Gwendolen and tries to talk her through the difference between the realities of the mind and the outer reality. He is more of a psychiatrist because - applying some form of a cathartic cure method - he realises her failing grasp on the present, the haunting presence of the past, and his endeavour to bring her back from the brink of total collapse and madness. Ruth Leys states that ‘flashbacks, nightmares, and other experiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt...explosive violence’ are symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to ‘pathogenic secret’, in other words incest. She succinctly states that: ‘The idea is that the traumatic experience in its sheer extremity, its affront to common norms and expectations, shatters or disables the victim’s cognitive
and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system”.  

Mrs. Davilow knows about the heinous crime that caused her daughter to fall from innocence. In chapter nine, Gwendolen openly accuses her mother of not protecting her innocence. Her words are suggestive and caused her mother ‘the crashed look and the rising sob that she had given a deep wound’ (DD, 80). The recurrent and disturbing image of the wound in the novel is a binding, extended metaphor with psychological and mental associations on Gwendolen and her mother. On Mrs. Davilow, it weighs on her conscious as an unpunished crime, and on Gwendolen, it clarifies the meaning of “The Spoilt Child” and knits it within the fabric of the novel as its overriding theme. She bitterly asks her mother: ‘Why didn’t you bring me in that way, mamma?’ (DD, 80). Mrs. Davilow and her sister were protected from ‘wickedness’, unlike Gwendolen who matured at the age of five, as the narrator informs us in chapter three (DD, 16). Her mother is depicted as a weak and pathetic figure; she has no substance. She fails always to protect Gwendolen, and ironically succeeds in playing a major part in securing her marriage to Grandcourt. She, in doing so, saves herself and her other daughters from poverty. Gwendolen is Eliot’s masterpiece because she eludes conventional representation and invites the readers to see the transgressive vein in her depiction. She is limned in conjunction with the idea of memory and the unrepresentability of her past. Her marriage aggravated and enacted old wounds and led to her collapse. In this article, I have taken an innovative step and shown how a careful use of trauma theories, without burdening the text with our contemporary theories, show how Gwendolen’s past keeps invading her present. Like her memories that cannot be sloughed off but should be kept sequestered, the narrator keeps asking questions about her and fails to provide a comprehensive account for her pain and current state of mind.

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that remains elusive. Her pain keeps surfacing as unexpected fits, screaming, shouting, fainting, dreams and nightmares. Extreme hatred of men and murderous wishes are clear indication of her tantalising experience.

Daniel Deronda is a text that straddles carefully the borders of morality and immorality, innocence and guilt, transgression and norm, and resistance and obedience. Eliot is intent on debating issues related to morality and relations of power within the institution of marriage. Gwendolen and Lydia complement each other and share the transgressive position of ‘fallen women’. Gwendolen could be seen as both a victim and threat in Victorian times. Percival and Hendrick show the link between sexual abuse, the corruption of the child, and the bearing of that on the social order and norms. Percival states that: ‘[I]n all civilized countries the honour and chastity of the female sex are guarded from violence [...] this protection is at once humane, just and necessary to morality’. Eliot was writing her book at a time when the statutory age of consent was twelve for women. This age was raised to thirteen in 1875, a year before the publication of the novel. Child abuse and incest were debated during that time and some legal battles were being fought. Yet, incest was criminalised only in 1908. Eliot is contemplating what is legal and what is moral in her society and undermining, in so doing, the gendered notions of sexual morality. The laws were not in place, but Eliot is inviting her readers to reflect on these taboo topics morally and ethically prior to their legal enforcement. Being both the victim and the threat situates Gwendolen in liminal territory, which is a dismantling of the Victorian dichotomy. In its Victorian version the legal is immoral; domestic ideals are portrayed as a conspiring force against women and the disenfranchised.


33 Percival, Thomas, Medical Jurisprudence or a code of Ethics and Institutes Adapted to the Professions of Physic and Surgery (Manchester: Printed for Private Circulation, 1794), p. 82-3.
The flashback technique that Eliot uses mirrors the movement of Gwendolen’s mind. Her mental reflections, though posited in the present, are underpinned by memories of the past. The thrust of my argument is to demonstrate that transgression is an authorial device that remains Eliot’s prerogative. She uses it to alter what her female characters fail to alter. With the exception of the opera singer, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, there is a sense of defeat and a mood of resignation in the depiction of Gwendolen and Lydia. I have contended in this article that beneath the surface there is an authorial relentless effort to undo the social constraints by exposing them. One of Eliot’s most defiant and articulate female characters is the Jewish opera singer, Leonora Alcharisi. She, unlike Lydia and Gwendolen, is empowered by a voice and a status. Her words are powerful, and her transgression is resistance. While there is a suppressed volcano that only consumes Gwendolen and Lydia, there is an authorial power behind the Princess. When she meets her son, Daniel Deronda, the Princess offers no apology for giving him away. When challenged she tells him, 'You are not a woman. You may try – but you can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl’ (DD, 541). The Princess fought the orthodox Jewish tradition, the gentile prejudices, and did not succumb to the ‘the Chinese feet’ mould. In her dialogue, she calls on and draws parallels from different cultures and religions to voice women’s concerns. My reading of her statement shows how Eliot’s own convictions are brought to the fore. Like Eliot, the Princess is an exceptionally talented woman, is destined to transgress and break ‘the Chinese feet’ mould in order to trigger changes and lead resistance.

In this article, I have defined the concept of transgression in literature and argued its importance in the writing and reading of Daniel Deronda, Eliot’s last work of fiction. I have as well demonstrated that the transgressive energies in the depiction of Gwendolen are brought into being by the author and
The Victorian contemporary feminist readers alike. Ultimately, I have pinpointed the dramatisation of the rift between the moral and the legal in Victorian society. Transgression in *Daniel Deronda*, in my understanding, acts as an authorial agency which, as Blanchot states is ‘l’atteinte a l'impossible, le franchissement de l'infranchissable’.
Primary Materials:


Secondary Materials:


Percival, Thomas, *Medical Jurisprudence or a Code of Ethics and Institutes Adapted to the Professions of Physic and Surgery* (Manchester: Printed for Private Circulation, 1794).


