

Hannah Neufeld will be beginning her M.A. Studies in the Graduate Program in English this fall. Her essay, comparing George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, with the television adaptation by Andrew Davies, was nominated for the York English Department 4<sup>th</sup>-year essay prize. The paper analyzes Eliot's comparison of the situation of women and of the Jewish community in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. Sometimes called George Eliot's "Zionist novel," it looks outside class-structured England toward what its hero, Deronda, sees as a new society in the East. Key episodes occur in the Mediterranean, and at the end its hero sets sail for what he sees as a land of promise.

---

Lost in Translation: George Eliot's and Andrew Davies' *Daniel Deronda*(s)

*Daniel Deronda* (1876) was George Eliot's final novel. The dual-plot narrative chronicles the lives of the two main characters, Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. Although these characters have very little in common, they are continually drawn together – even as their paths begin to diverge. This essay will offer a comparative analysis of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Andrew Davies' dramatization. The film adaptation was directed by Tom Hooper, produced by BBC One and originally aired in 2002 as a television miniseries. The main cast includes Hugh Dancy, Romola Garai, Hugh Bonneville, Jodhi May, Amanda Root, Edward Fox, Simon Schatzberger, Greta Scacchi, and Barbara Hershey. Oftentimes, classic works of literature are adapted for film or television to increase the relevance and palatability of the text in the eyes of a modern audience (Winterson). In her review of Davies' BBC adaptation, critic Barbary Hardy notes, "There are vast problems in televising this novel with its historical reference, conceptual discourse, social scope, and original psycho-drama..." (111). Having acknowledged the Herculean task undertaken by Davies in his adaptation of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, it is worth mentioning that the film has undeniable entertainment

value. Although fans of George Eliot's novel are unlikely to be disappointed by this BBC dramatization, in his attempts to make *Daniel Deronda* more accessible to contemporary viewers Davies' screenplay "goes off book" and in doing so suppresses some of the novel's central themes and misrepresents the relationships between several of the main characters.

In the way of characterization, the televised *Daniel Deronda* lacks the touch of Eliot's "magic pen." In many ways, the characters that inhabit the pages of Eliot's 1876 novel seem more like living beings than those depicted in the 2002 film. This may be attributed to the fact that much of the reader's knowledge of the characters is gleaned from Eliot's observations of their mental and emotional interiority. The weaknesses in Davies' characterization may be due partially to medium; indeed, it would be exceedingly difficult to recreate Eliot's remarkable capacity for narration on screen without relying on lengthy voice-overs – a technique that is generally thought to lack widespread cinematic appeal.

One crucial aspect of characterization that is omitted entirely from Davies' rendering of *Daniel Deronda* is Daniel's recollections of his boyhood. For instance, the sixteenth chapter of the novel begins with Daniel's memory of reading Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics* at age thirteen. He is prompted by his reading to ask his tutor why popes and cardinals have so many 'nephews'. When his tutor explains that the clergymen's 'nephews' were really their illegitimate children Daniel begins to wonder whether or not he is Sir Hugo's illegitimate son (Eliot 164). The narrator later identifies this as a formative experience that changed Daniel's perspective: "since the age of thirteen Daniel had associated the deepest experience of his affections with what was a

pure supposition, namely, that Sir Hugo was his father: that was a hypothesis which had been the source of a passionate struggle within him..."(Eliot 512). These details of Daniel's childhood are completely unmentioned in the film adaptation of *Daniel Deronda*. This is just one example of Davies' reductive streamlining. Although at first glance, the removal of seemingly insignificant details is understandable, these finer points reflect Eliot's meticulousness as an author and contribute to the cohesiveness of the text as a whole. Age thirteen is considered to be a coming-of-age in many cultures, but it is of appreciable consequence when analyzed in the context of the novel's central themes. Eliot's identification of age thirteen as a landmark in Daniel's life is meaningful, as this is the age in the Jewish tradition when young men celebrate their *bar mitzvah*, a ceremony which signifies that they are now fully-fledged members of the Jewish community and are able to participate in all aspects of religious observance and existence. This detail is a component necessary to understand Daniel's search for his identity, and his progression towards Mirah, faith, and his vocation. In Eliot's work, every detail is added with the purpose of contributing to the narrative as a whole. Unfortunately, the medium of film/television demands more brevity than that of literature, and consequently, some of Eliot's masterful intricacies inevitably fall by the wayside.

Judaism is an essential element of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Although Davies does not eliminate the Jewish aspects from *Daniel Deronda* entirely, he does dilute them considerably. In the novel, Eliot portrays Daniel as having a growing fascination with Jewish history, culture, and language – even before he discovers the secret of his birth. During his first encounter with Mordecai in the bookstore, Daniel chooses a book on Jewish history and concedes that he is "certainly interested in Jewish history" (Eliot 386)

and is later taught Hebrew by Mordecai (Eliot 591). In contrast, the film fails to document the development of Daniel's interest in what will eventually become his vocation and life's work. Davies does, however, attempt to address the pre-Zionist sentiments that are so ardently professed by Mordecai throughout the novel. In the third installment of the television serial, Davies' screenplay recreates the meeting of 'The Philosophers' at The Hand and Banner (Ep. III 42:29-44:38). In this short scene, Mordecai passionately proclaims "We must have our own country after centuries of persecution" (Ep. III - 42:30) before his radical (and highly relevant) prophesizing is cut short by a consumptive coughing fit. During Eliot's rendering, Daniel expresses his opinion that "As long as there is a remnant of national consciousness, I suppose nobody will deny that there may be a new stirring of memories which may inspire arduous action" (Eliot 536), much to Mordecai's delight. This is one of the first instances in which Daniel's beliefs appear to align with Mordecai's, and therefore may be seen to foreshadow the conclusion of the novel. Interestingly, the televised Daniel appears to dash Mordecai's hopes when he poses the question, "Isn't the way forward through assimilation?" (Ep. III - 43:11). The purpose of Davies' curious discrepancy in his account of Daniel's opinion is unclear. As Terence R. Wright observes in "Davies's *Daniel Deronda*: Economising with the Jews", "That Deronda embraces his Jewish identity at a personal level is clear enough in the adaptation but that he discovers in Judaism a historical religion worthy of not only reverence but of a lifetime's commitment is simply not shown" (114).

Although the treatment of the Jewish theme in the televised *Daniel Deronda* does not do justice to Eliot's original vision, it is perhaps worthy of mention that the scenes

that depict Daniel's expeditions to Whitechapel (a predominantly Jewish section of London) when he is searching for Mirah's family, in my opinion, constitute the film's most visually compelling imagery.

On the BBC's official webpage for the miniseries, the following synopsis is offered: "Hugh Dancy stars as the eponymous Daniel Deronda, with Romola Garai as his soul mate, Gwendolen Harleth. Though entranced with Daniel, Gwendolen is forced into an oppressive marriage with Henleigh Grandcourt (Hugh Bonneville), while Daniel finds a new life through his friendship with Mirah Lapidoth (Jodhi May)" ("Drama – Daniel Deronda"). Although it is impossible to be certain, one can only assume that, were she alive, George Eliot would certainly object to such an oversimplification of what is, arguably, her most ideologically and thematically complex work. While the aforementioned synopsis was, in all likelihood, not written by Davies himself, it is emblematic of what is the key discrepancy between his adaptation and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* – the representation of the relationship between Daniel and Gwendolen.

In both the novel and the film adaptation of *Daniel Deronda*, the seemingly disparate dual-plot narrative is woven together by the connection between the two main characters, Daniel and Gwendolen. The chief difference between Eliot's novel and its televised dramatization is the depiction of the nature of Daniel and Gwendolen's relationship. Whereas Eliot portrays the connection between the two characters as being based on Gwendolen's dependence on Daniel's goodness and guidance, Davies' depiction overemphasizes the unrealized romance and mutual attraction that was subtly suggested by Eliot's description of their first meeting. The potential romantic aspect of Daniel and Gwendolen's connection to one another is placed in the foreground of Davies'

dramatization. In nearly every scene involving the two characters there is palpable sexual tension between Daniel (Hugh Dancy) and Gwendolen (Romola Garai). Both the novel and the film seem to be in agreement that their connection was forged when, after locking eyes across a crowded room, and witnessing Gwendolen's reckless gambling, Daniel redeems Gwendolen's turquoise necklace that she had pawned and which he 'anonymously' returns to her. This is depicted in the first installment of the miniseries, which is, arguably, the episode in which Davies is most loyal to Eliot's text.

The overemphasis on Gwendolen and Daniel's initial mutual attraction is due in part to Davies' depiction of Daniel's relationship with Mirah, and his alterations to Mirah's and Gwendolen's interactions. In the film, after performing a hymn in Hebrew for Deronda and the Meyricks, Mirah becomes emotional and reflects on her early remembrances of her love for her mother before inquiring whether Daniel has any memories of his own mother. Daniel says that he does not but that, "[he has] always had an image of someone very pure and sweet, and I think of her as being hurt by life, and I've imagined helping her, saving her" (Episode II – 21:35-23:10). This is a striking moment in the film. In Daniel's confession about how he has imagined his mother he has described a woman with the same personality traits as Mirah, and who also needs to be "saved". The peculiarity of this interchange between Daniel and Mirah may be due to the difficulties of conveying a character's innermost thoughts and emotional interiority in the medium of the film. This scene may be interpreted in a variety of ways; this constructed conversation which appears nowhere in Eliot's text may be the filmmaker's attempt to reveal that Daniel had inwardly begun to link his life to Mirah's, and/or a demonstration of Daniel's capacity for empathy and desire to do good – both of which are revealed

primarily through Eliot's narrator. The inescapable fact of the matter is that Daniel's words and affect in this scene undermine his relationship with Mirah as they leave the reader to infer that Daniel's desire to protect, and his love for Mirah is born out of his ambition to do precisely that for his mother. There is something in Daniel's words and affect that seem to convey a potential Oedipus complex.

The unrealized romance between Gwendolen and Daniel is emphasized in Davies' screenplay through his alterations of the interactions between Gwendolen and Mirah. In the novel, Gwendolen visits Mirah after a particularly distressing conversation with Grandcourt in which he ridicules Gwendolen's idealization of Deronda and suggests that it is 'indecent' of him to praise a young woman who is patronized by Lady Mallinger (Eliot 588). He implies that Deronda is corrupt because of the position that he is putting Ms. Lapidoth in. In Eliot's version, Gwendolen seeks out Mirah, as she is desperate to have her belief in Daniel's goodness affirmed: "'Tell me,' said Gwendolen, putting her hand on Mirah's, and speaking hardly above a whisper – 'tell me – tell me the truth. You are sure he is quite good. You know no evil of him. Any evil that people say is false'" (591). One may infer that Gwendolen wishes to confirm the differences between Daniel, whom she looks to for moral and psychic guidance, and her husband whom she has increasingly grown to fear and resent. In Davies' adaptation Gwendolen's conversation with Mirah is driven by her desire to discern the true nature of Mirah's relationship with Daniel (Ep. III - 35:33-37:44). Their dialogue ends abruptly when Mirah feels that Gwendolen has insulted her feminine virtue. In her novel, George Eliot suggests a parallel between the condition of Jews and women in nineteenth-century Britain as both groups are marginalized and bound by the status quo of Victorian society. Eliot

establishes this parallel through sub-textual suggestions of the similarities between Mirah and Gwendolen, who are both performers in their own right. As a Jewish woman, Mirah is less bound by the restrictions of middle-class womanhood and is thus able to perform publicly to earn a living. Gwendolen, as a Gentile and a member of the landed classes, performs to secure a good marriage for herself (and for her family). As Charles Hatten points out in *The End of Domesticity*, “The parallel between Mirah and Gwendolen’s being reduced to human commodities, the impoverished Jewish woman and the wealthy Gentile, suggests that women at every class level are equally threatened by the imperial power of the market” (199). Due to the positioning of Mirah and Gwendolen as romantic rivals, the televised *Daniel Deronda* does not establish a parallel between the condition of Jews and women, which may be seen as a central feature of Eliot’s text.

Ultimately, the suggestion that Gwendolen and Daniel are ‘meant to be’ together that is put forth by Davies’ dramatization is simply not an accurate representation of their relationship in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Near the conclusion of her text, Eliot’s narrator illustrates the nature of Gwendolen’s reliance on Daniel;

She was in the unconscious state of reliance and expectation which is a common experience with us when we are preoccupied with our own trouble or our own purposes. We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our motives. Her imagination had not been turned to a future union with Deronda by any other than the spiritual tie which had been continually strengthening; but it had also not been turned towards a future separation from him. Love-making and marriage – how could they now be the imagery in which poor Gwendolen’s deepest attachment could spontaneously clothe itself? (771)

This passage demonstrates the nature of the connection between Daniel and Gwendolen at the conclusion of the novel. Although Daniel is the individual to whom Gwendolen

feels the “deepest attachment”, she does not imagine either a future union or separation from him. The narrator also remarks on Daniel’s “inward confession that if all this had happened little more than a year ago, he would hardly have asked himself whether he loved her: the impetuous determining impulse which would have moved him would have been to save her from sorrow... But now, love and duty had thrown other bonds around him, and that impulse could no longer determine his life” (Eliot 765). While Davies captures some of the spirit of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* he is unable to reproduce Eliot’s talent for subtlety, nuance, and ever-broadening perspectives.

Hannah Neufeld

## Works Cited

*Daniel Deronda*. Adapted by Andrew Davies, directed by Tom Hooper, BBC One, 2002.

*iTunes*, [itunes.apple.com/ca/tv-season/daniel-deronda/id428515214](https://itunes.apple.com/ca/tv-season/daniel-deronda/id428515214). Accessed 27 Nov. 2017.

"Drama - Daniel Deronda." *BBC*, [www.bbc.co.uk/drama/deronda/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/deronda/). Accessed 19 Nov. 2017.

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Penguin Books, 1995.

Hardy, Barbara. "The BBC 'Daniel Deronda.'" *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, Sept. 2003, pp. 111-13. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/42827765](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42827765). Accessed 27 Nov. 2017.

Hatten, Charles. *The End of Domesticity: Alienation from the Family in Dickens, Eliot, and James*. University of Delaware Press, 2010.

Winterson, Jeanette. "How relevant are the heroines of Dr Zhivago and Daniel Deronda today?" *The Guardian*, 21 Nov. 2002. [www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/21/gender.uk](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/21/gender.uk). Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.

Wright, Terence R. "Davies's Daniel Deronda: Economising with the Jews." *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, Sept. 2003, pp. 113-14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/42827766](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42827766). Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.