

George Eliot's Visual Moments: The Construction of Character in *Daniel Deronda*

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Abstract: George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, is insistently concerned with the visual and with the problematics of looking. Like many of Eliot's novels, it examines the visual in relation to notions of reliability, perspective, interpretation, representation, the subjective versus the objective, and the relation between observation and imagination. This paper is concerned with the creation and development of character as unveiled through visual moments within the diegesis. Focus is on the function of the visual between characters and the study proposes that visual moments – understood as the combination of looker, “looker”, the manner of looking or seeing, the context of looking and the form of narration – significantly contribute to the development of characterisation. Furthermore, it suggests that George Eliot, to a large extent, locates characters' personal beliefs and ideologies in visual exchanges. Visual moments in *Daniel Deronda* are identified with the aid of corpus linguistic methods. Corpora aid to pinpoint the frequency and range of lexical items related to the visual and this study examines the lexeme *look*, specifically, in order to trace and unravel character construction and development. By so doing, it aims to complement or qualify the composition of character as presented through the combination of direct speech, free indirect discourse and the agency of a reflective and analytical narrative voice.

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? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?

She who raised these questions in Daniel Deronda's mind was occupied in gambling... (*Daniel Deronda* 1:3)

The opening to *Daniel Deronda* not only introduces the problematics of looking, which figures as a running theme throughout the novel, but also sets a standard for the narrative's difficulty at arriving at any straightforward judgement concerning character. The passage concisely explores the act of looking and seeing as spurring questions of representation, point of view, reliability and interpretation as well as observation and imagination and object versus subject. As always, concerned with representation and ahead of her times, Eliot's free indirect discourse resists absolutes and in near post-modern fashion the introductory chapter itself experiments with flashbacks and inversions of sequence in order to highlight the scene where Deronda and Gwendolen see each other for the first time.

Eliot's investigation of the visual has been studied from various perspectives, often with primary focus on ekphrasis and on the relation between realism and representation. Little has been said, so far, however, about the way in which characters in her narratives look at or see each other and how these *visual moments* serve to affect the way in which readers' understand characters and the relations between them. Visual moments – as the combination of looker, lookee, the manner of looking, the context of looking and the form of narration – contribute to the creation and development of character as well as to readers' understanding and interpretations of characters.

In *Daniel Deronda*, particularly, Eliot locates characters' personal beliefs and ideologies in visual exchanges. According to Amanda Cornwall the novel posits “visual experience as the location where personal belief, aesthetic experience and ideological conclusions collide”.¹ These visual moments are the narrative mode in which Eliot manages to create a tension between characters, establishing an experience of the senses through the verbal visual as well as representing the inner workings of a character's ideologies, aesthetics and personal beliefs (or indeed other characters' (mis)interpretation of the same). These cross-sections are never fixed, but like always with Eliot's perspectives, remain ambiguous and multi-layered.

Although it is her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* marks something of a new departure for Eliot. Unlike her previous works, it is set in contemporary England and takes a pioneering new approach ideologically in its presentation of Jewish life. The latter has come into a great deal of criticism, not least by contemporary reviewers, but it is primarily the novel's parallel plots that has caused annoyance among those who have found the Gwendolen parts titillating and vivid and the Mordecai/Mirah stories dreary and dull. Eliot herself was aware of these criticisms and scolded readers who would “talk of nothing in it but Gwendolen”, arguing that she meant “everything in the book to be related to everything else there”.² With regard to visual moments, however, a focus on Gwendolen is inevitable. The novel is, in large part, about performance; the acting out of roles determined by social convention requires all characters to take part. For performance, an audience is required and the visual essential. Gwendolen is the greatest actor in the novel and so it is understandable that she should be involved in the largest number of visual moments.

¹ Cornwall, A. (2015). *The Tension of the Real: Visuality in Nineteenth Century Realism*. Unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Oregon, 36.

² Haight, G. S., ed. (1954-78). *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, vi, 290.

In order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of visual moments, this study approaches the novel from a corpus-stylistic perspective, which, in this particular context, entails a focus on the most common lexeme, *look*, both as a verb and as a noun, including all its forms. The rationale behind this approach is familiar from linguistic studies. Large amounts of text are studied using concordance, which allows the possibility of observing repeated patterns of language use in a way that may not be possible under careful reading and re-reading of texts. The corpus linguistic tool introduces an alternative way of approaching a text. Elena Tognini-Bonelli argues that whereas reading in the normal case is horizontal and sequential, a concordance offers a vertical view of a text where recurring words and patterns are presented one on top of the other.³ Concretely, for this study, a concordance offers the possibility of studying all the occurrences of the verb *look* and to observe features in the contexts of each use.⁴

In practice, the search term *look* is retrieved and displayed together with surrounding text. There are a total of 819 instances of *look* in *Daniel Deronda*; this study analyses them in terms of who the active looker is, what or, more importantly, who they look at, as well as any modifiers indicating, for example, how the looking takes place. Gwendolen and Daniel have nine encounters in the novel. They are the most frequent pairing involved in 58 visual moments as indicated by *look*, 28 of which Gwendolen is the looker and 30 of which Daniel is. Visual moments between Gwendolen and her husband Grandcourt come in at a close second with 55 instances. Here, the balance is less even as Grandcourt looks at Gwendolen 37 times and Gwendolen at Grandcourt 18 times. Significantly, Gwendolen is the only character Grandcourt actually looks at. The narrator looks at Gwendolen 32 times, which is more than twice the number the narrator looks at all the other characters combined. Despite recurrent gazing on Gwendolen, however, she is the target of someone's "looking" (162 times) only slightly more often than she is the looker (152 times). Daniel is looked at 114 times, and focuses his own gaze on someone or something 105 times, again as indicated by the lexeme *look* in its various forms.

The opening paragraph above serves as an example of the way in which visual exchanges between characters, and in this case between Gwendolen and Daniel, sets a narrative tone as

³ Tognini-Bonelli, E. (2001). *Corpus Linguistics at Work*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 3.

⁴ This study focuses on the lexeme *look*; future studies will look at many other visually orientated lexemes such as *watch*, *gaze*, *see*, *examine* etc.

well as allows readers' access into the workings of their psyches. Narratologically, the paragraph deviates from the traditional structure of a 19th century novel by opening through the free indirect discourse of a yet unidentified character.

Daniel's and Gwendolen's looks are described in terms of coercion; they are compelled – forced – unwillingly to look at the other. Something takes over and they lose control of themselves as looking agents – they can only control their composure. Readers soon learn that the looker in the first part of the opening paragraph is Daniel. Here, although Daniel is the (male) gazer, he is not in control of the visual direction. Instead, the coercion he feels (and that we will learn Gwendolen also feels) triggers a tension between the two. The contemplation of an “evil genius” points to a woman who is not an inferior object feeding off his attention and in return granting him pleasure. She is an equal at whom he is afraid to look yet cannot look away from. Herein lies a negotiation of power, an imbalance that is unfamiliar to Daniel and not typically found in the Victorian novel. Referring to the coercion aspect, Peter Brooks states that “if, as Laura Mulvey has /.../ taught us, [that] women are coded for ‘look-at-ness’, here there is already trouble in that coding, in the looker's sense of ‘coercion’ in the act”.⁵

The fact that Daniel's free indirect discourse, here, consists in large part of interrogations further accentuates the fluidity of both his and Gwendolen's characters; she cannot be pinpointed and he cannot arrive at any judgement.

Further into this first (and long) encounter, Gwendolen looks up from her gambling to survey the room. As she does so, her eyes meet Daniel's.

But in the course of that survey her eyes met Deronda's, and **instead of averting them** as she would have **desired to do**, she was unpleasantly conscious that **they were arrested** – how long? (1:5)

Gwendolen's coercion is felt as strongly as Daniel's and in this first chapter Eliot establishes Gwendolen in a dominant position. She can survey the room, she can scrutinise and she does not “stand down” in the power dynamics that the meeting of the eyes entail. Simultaneously, if we apply the idea of the Medusa to her, she seals her own fate by gazing back.⁶ As Gillian

⁵ Brooks, P. (2008). *Realist Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 97.

⁶ For a reading on Medusa in relation to characters in George Eliot's novels, see Andres, S. (1999). George Eliot's Challenge to Medusa's Gendered Disparities. *The Victorian Newsletter*, 95, 27-33 and Alban, G.M.E. (2010).

Alban notes, however, it is not the return of the men's gazes that activates Gwendolen's psychological torment, but rather her visions of Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's rejected lover and mother to his illegitimate children.⁷ References to Medusa are made directly in the novel as Gwendolen observes Lydia and Grandcourt together:

The Medusa-apparition was made effective beyond Lydia's conception by the shock it gave Gwendolen actually to see Grandcourt ignoring this woman who had once been the nearest in the world to him, along with the children she had borne him (48:517-518).

Looking at the 58 visual moments between Gwendolen and Daniel and studying how they gradually develop, an intensifying focus on Gwendolen's need for approval from Daniel is discernible. Despite gazing back and despite a rejection of gendered power imbalances, Gwendolen's sense of being scrutinised by Daniel begins already in this first encounter.

The darting sense that **he was measuring her and looking down on her** as an inferior, that he was of different quality from the human dross around her, that he felt himself in a region outside and above her, and was **examining** her as a **specimen of a lower order**, roused a tingling resentment which stretched the moment with conflict.

Deronda's gaze seemed to have acted as an evil eye. Her stake was gone (1:5-6).

Gwendolen is well used to being studied as a sexual subject in a performative game. She poses in public and kisses her own mirror image in private (2:13). She has a narcissistic trust in her own beauty; that it alone will bequeath her success. She is admired and coddled. But under Daniel's gaze she senses a scrutiny that does not stem from desire or admiration. Rather, it makes her feel stripped of her sexuality and judged by another set of criteria. The performative game, in which she is comfortable and in which she takes part as a willing agent, is disrupted and the balance of power destabilised. Like a scientist, Daniel observes and measures; Gwendolen wriggles under his examination.

The context of the scene is important, however. Gwendolen has learnt of Lydia Glasher and her children; she has been urged by Lydia not to marry Grandcourt so that Lydia's eldest son may

From the Erotic Blush to the Petrifying Medusa Gaze in George Eliot's Novels. *The Victorian Newsletter*, 118, 67-86.

⁷ Alban, G.M.E. (2010). From the Erotic Blush to the Petrifying Medusa Gaze in George Eliot's Novels", *The Victorian Newsletter*, 118, 67-86.

still inherit his father. And so Gwendolen runs off to friends and roulette-tables in Germany to get away from an intolerable situation. It is at the roulette-tables, in medias res, the novel opens. Her resolve at this stage is strong and her morality intact – she has determined to refuse Grandcourt – yet she shirks under Daniel’s eyes. From Gwendolen’s perspective, the sense of moral judgement is felt stronger than anything sexualised and for a reader familiar with the events leading up to this scene, it is apparent that Gwendolen is projecting her anxiety and conscience about her role in Lydia Glasher’s fate onto Daniel’s gaze. It is notable, however, that the narratological distortion of the linear time-sequence that the opening scene entails, does not allow first-time readers that understanding. Their comprehension of Gwendolen and Daniel is the same as that first impression the characters have of each other; it is only upon a second reading that readers, with the knowledge of what has led up to the scene, can take a step back and analyse what is actually going on in the psyches of the characters.⁸

The concept of an “evil genius” or here an “evil eye” is revisited from the opening lines. Daniel’s moral supremacy is almost wizard-like and his gaze has the effect of turning Gwendolen into a loser both as a gambler and as a moral character. Hence, the visual is tied up with a win-lose theme. Daniel’s gaze makes Gwendolen lose at the gambling table; Grandcourt’s gaze, on the other hand, makes her win at the archery games. Visual moments between Daniel and Gwendolen show that it is the creation of Gwendolen’s character that is primarily constructed in the visual exchanges between them. The development of her character is played off against his fairly static moral superiority (and at times sympathy) in relation to her. Deronda’s gaze serves as holding up a mirror to Gwendolen’s character and innermost emotions.

Grandcourt and Gwendolen are involved in approximately the same number of visual moments as Daniel and Gwendolen, i.e. 55 in total – 18 where Gwendolen looks at Grandcourt and approximately 37 where Grandcourt looks at Gwendolen. Unsurprisingly, Grandcourt looks straight at Gwendolen more than twice as much as she at him. As mentioned, Gwendolen is the only character that Grandcourt actually looks at.

⁸ *Daniel Deronda* was issued at monthly intervals from February to September 1876, giving rise to great speculation both publicly and most certainly privately as to what would happen in the next issue. Eliot’s play with time sequences here will most likely have led to some interesting conversations at the time.

As with Daniel in their first encounter the non-looking between Gwendolen and Grandcourt is even more intense than the actual looking but for very different reasons. Of course, Gwendolen does not resist a coercion to look at Grandcourt, but rather, after they are married, she suppresses the repulsion from doing so: “But he sat, too, and not far from her—just in front, where to avoid looking at him must have the emphasis of effort” (48:506). The more repulsed by and frightened of Grandcourt she is, the more oppressive does his physical presence become: “She turned her head quickly away from him and looked angrily toward the end of the room: she would have risen, but he was in her way” (48:507). Despite feeble efforts of defiance, she is the oppressed in this relationship.

Gwendolen looks at Grandcourt eleven times before they are married and only four once they are. At one point her free indirect discourse reveals that she was “wondering what the effect of looking at him would be on herself rather than on him” (13:113).⁹ Indeed, what can these few instances of looking at Grandcourt say about the characteristics of Gwendolen? In approximately the same total number of visual moments between Gwendolen and Daniel as between Gwendolen and Grandcourt, Gwendolen looks twice as much at Daniel. The non-looking at Grandcourt, whether expressed as a non-looking act or not, accentuates her initial “unfeeling” and her later repugnance.

When Grandcourt looks at Gwendolen before courtship, he takes on his characteristic indifference. Once they are courting and when they, subsequently, have married, Grandcourt’s gaze is highly charged with modifiers: He looks “straight into her eyes” (3 times); he looks “down on her” (3 times); he looks “steady into her eyes”; he looks “into her eyes with a narrow gaze”; he looks “straight at her”; he looks at her with a “lizard-like expression” and he looks at her “persistently with a slightly exploring gaze”. After they are married, Gwendolen avoids looking at Grandcourt. Gwendolen, who, before marriage, had “conceived that after marriage she would most probably be able to manage him thoroughly” (13: 115) loses this particular power struggle, and the development of this loss can be traced clearly through the imbalance of direction in their visual moments.

⁹ Gwendolen’s speculation makes an interesting relation to a narratorial comment earlier in the narrative which reads: “And often the grand meaning of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them” (*Daniel Deronda*, 17:158).

Foucault's reading of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon Writings* might serve to explain the negotiations of power that can be seen develop through these visual moments. Grandcourt is the unseen viewer; his is the constant gaze through which control and disciplining power is yielded. Indeed, Gwendolen several times refers to her marriage as an imprisonment: "The humiliation of standing an obvious prisoner" (48: 510). Grandcourt's persistent and narrow gaze, his looking down on her, his looking straight at her serve as surveillance and means by which he "breaks her in". The power relations are further accentuated by animal imagery. Like the horse she was given as an engagement gift, Gwendolen needs to be tamed as Grandcourt holds her by "bit and bridle" (54:582).¹⁰

With regard to visual power struggles between Grandcourt and Gwendolen, however, she has the final say. Sailing outside the coast of Genoa, they fall into bad weather and Grandcourt is thrown overboard. To Gwendolen's surprise, he cannot swim:

I saw him sink, and my heart gave a leap as if it were going out of me. /.../ 'The rope!' he called out in a voice – not his own – I hear it now – and I stooped for the rope – I felt I must – I felt sure he could swim /.../ and I had the rope in my hand – no, there he was again – his face above the water – and he cried again – and I held my hand, and my heart said, 'Die!' – and he sank; and I felt 'It is done – I am wicked, I am lost!' (56:596-597)

Unable or unwilling to act, Gwendolen watches him drown. All she needs to do in order to be free, in order for her innermost wish to come through, is to look. Sophia Andres argues that "Grandcourt literally sinks under Gwendolen's 'dynamic glance'" (cf. the opening line of the novel).¹¹ But the consequences of that momentary inaction, of gazing without acting, fill her with guilt and anguish. She is relieved that Grandcourt is gone, but she is terrified that Daniel will now regard her as a murderess. His is the approval she seeks and his assessment of her actions determine her own sense of self-worth. By now, she has progressed from seeking attention for her aesthetics to seeking Daniel's approval of her moral value.

Gwendolen is rescued ashore and immediately another visual moment with Daniel ensues.

¹⁰ Grandcourt and Gwendolen are likened to an array of animals throughout the novel. Prior to meeting Grandcourt, Gwendolen imagines him as a magnified insect and they are both compared to serpents on several occasions. Grandcourt is a lizard, an alligator, a boa and a serpent coiled in wait for Gwendolen. For more on so called animetaphor in *Daniel Deronda*, see Pielak, C. "Hunting Gwendolen: Animetaphor in *Daniel Deronda*"

¹¹ Andres, S. (1999). George Eliot's Challenge to Medusa's Gendered Disparities, *The Victorian Newsletter*, 95, 27-33 (32).

Suddenly her wandering eyes fell on Deronda, standing before her, and immediately, as if she had been expecting him and looking for him, she tried to stretch out her arms, which were held back by her supporters, saying, in a muffled voice – “It is come, it is come! He is dead!” (55: 587)

Again, like at the roulette-tables, Gwendolen is at the centre of attention. Her performativity takes a different form here but she, nonetheless, needs to put on an act. As at Leubronn, she surveys the crowd (with a wandering eye) and again her eyes fall on Daniel. Yet, this time her gaze, albeit wandering, is also determined and less interested in who is looking at her as in seeking something particular. Daniel is her moral compass; he determines what and who she is now. His assessment of her narrative, her version of what happened on the water, will seal her fate. Piercing the crowd to find Daniel is as much seeking answers for what will happen next and where her future lies.

When Gwendolen’s search for a form of paternal approval turns into romantic affection, however, the dynamics change between herself and Daniel. His lack of erotic passion and somewhat curious religious awakening leave him having to break her heart in an intense farewell scene.

‘I am cruel, too, I am cruel,’ he repeated with a sort of groan, looking up at her imploringly [...] She bent forward to kiss his cheek, and he kissed hers. Then they looked at each other for an instant with clasped hands, and he turned away (69:690).

According to Sophia Andres, the scene subverts the “traditional binaries of the gaze” (1999, 32) as it is Daniel who looks up, imploringly, at Gwendolen and he who turns his eyes away. Jennifer Beauvais maintains that it is characteristic for Daniel to situate himself in the female role as he himself is a performer.¹² By positioning himself in the position of the women he attempts to save, Beauvais goes on, he surpasses “the female performers themselves” (118-119). According to Beauvais, thus, Eliot uses male performance, such as Daniel’s, to make a political point about gender conventions in the nineteenth century. Be that as it may, Eliot is also fully committed to religious humanism and the extension of sympathy. With the most simple understanding of Gwendolen’s and Daniel’s characters, it is clear that she represents egotism, he altruism and through his sympathy and fellow-feeling, he takes upon himself to

¹² Beauvais, J. (2020). *Domesticated Bachelors and Femininity in Victorian Novels*. McFarland & Company.

save her. Carole Robinson argues that the possibility of such a simple reading is where the novel fails as she maintains that “the ideology of sympathy and the contrast between ‘social’ and ‘selfish’ interests, are the rocks upon which the novel founders”.¹³ But there is little reason to stop short at a simple reading of *Daniel Deronda*; its complexities may not be as intricate as those in *Middlemarch* but they still abound as exemplified by analyses of a single and simple lexeme such as *look*.

Visual moments serve to affect understanding of characters’ make up and the relations between them. By tracing the development of visual moments throughout the novel, it is possible to determine the gradual change in characters’ relations and also the development of character itself. Indeed, character is a complex phenomenon which is constructed through a great deal more than just visual moments, i.e. through direct speech, through the agency of a reflective and analytical narrative voice and through free indirect speech moving between a character’s own thoughts and the evaluative discourse of the narrator. Nevertheless, visual moments add further information to the make up as well as call into play tensions between inward and outward vision, issues of perspective and subjectivity as well as perception and judgement. Eliot’s portrayals are never non-complex and there is a marvellous meta-level in the idea that the visual moment reveals as much about the looker as the lookee. Additionally, visual moments put into relief the ambiguity and disruptiveness of Eliot’s characters. Gwendolen is defiant, narcissistic and shallow as well as subdued, morally and ideologically anxious and passionate; Daniel is torn between attraction, morality, sympathy and self-fulfilment. In this study, it is the mere lexeme *look* that reveals these complexities. Think what the lexemes *see*, *observe*, *watch*, *eyes*, *gaze* and *glance* will do, once they are added to the analyses.

Note: This paper is based on a conference presentation that Mats and I gave together at the George Eliot International Bicentenary Conference in Leicester in 2019. All data, material, thoughts and ideas are as much Mats’ as they are mine.

¹³ Robinson, C. (1964). The Severe Angel. *English Literary History*, 31, 278-300 (298).

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