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But What Can I Do? **Ambition and Vocation in *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda***

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This article examines the relationship between ambition and vocation in three characters in Victorian author George Eliot's novels: Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and the title character in *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot's own experiences as a female author writing under a male penname infiltrate her treatment of her characters' ambition, and she deploys gender, and the societal constraints tied to gender, as actors on her characters' potential for realizing their ambition. In Eliot's development of her characters, she provides them with varying degrees and types of ambition and various opportunities to find ways to use their ambition, and in doing so, develops an assertion on the egoism of ambition: ambition without purpose becomes selfish. Through the lives of her characters, Eliot justifies her own professional ambition and her vocation as a novelist: her novels influence her readers and her society in impactful and positive ways, avoiding the selfishness she discourages in her novels.

KEYWORDS: gender, ambition, vocation.

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Extremely proud of her successes and conscious of her reputation, George Eliot seems to have held high expectations for herself throughout her career. As a woman author in male-dominated Victorian England, Eliot had few easy opportunities for professional success or advancement, and because of that disadvantage, her livelihood and success necessitated ambition. But in her novels, Eliot suggests that personal ambition becomes a closed circuit centered around the self, inevitably becoming selfish. That moral philosophy seems irreconcilable with Eliot's own professional life. How could a woman with so much financial and professional success assert the egoism of ambition? How did she integrate her advocating of selflessness with a profession so centered in the self? The answer to these questions lies in Eliot's approach to novel writing: she explores various kinds and degrees of ambition in her novels, and by using her authorial position as a teaching platform, those explorations become more complex and increasingly reconcilable with her own ambition. In her first novel *Adam Bede* in 1859, her seventh novel *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* in 1874, and her last novel *Daniel Deronda*, controversial for its themes of Jewish sympathy, shortly thereafter in 1876, Eliot explores and develops her moral philosophies of ambition and vocation – how can ambitious people resist egoism? In developing her answers to this question, Eliot validates her career. She affirms the role of the novelist as moral teacher, combining her own ambition for greatness with a sincere desire to contribute to her society – the necessary ingredient for selfless ambition.

Eliot develops this philosophy through many characters, most notably Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and Daniel Deronda in the novel of the same name. Eliot tests how these characters fare when given different degrees of ambition and different possibilities of utilizing that ambition. Early in her career, Eliot had not yet solidified her views on personal aspiration, and a preliminary sketch of her opinions appears in Dinah, a young and zealous woman preacher. Eliot makes Dinah's job easy for her: she fills Dinah with selfless love of others and untiring passions for helping people, and she allows Dinah to enact that implanted ambition in

her profession. Dinah can satisfy all of her desires; she can focus her energy in a productive and outward-looking vocation.

As Eliot moves on to *Middlemarch* several years later, she tries a different combination of wanting and doing in Dorothea, a young wealthy Middlemarch resident. Like Dinah, Dorothea has an ardor to help people, but unlike Dinah, Dorothea's ardor comes from a dissatisfaction with idleness rather than from genuine selflessness or religious calling. In her differentiation between these two female characters, Eliot echoes philosopher and women's advocate Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote nearly a century earlier that "religion is ...separated from morality by a ceremonial veil" (111), emphasizing the distinction between insincere religious fervor and morality. Dorothea's piety, Eliot asserts, is selfish and therefore immoral, while that of Dinah is genuine; Dinah's religion aligns with morality. Eliot does not give Dorothea the option of preaching, and as a woman in a society without opportunities for women, Dorothea cannot *do* anything with her "wandering energy" (*Daniel Deronda* 365), a phrase Eliot uses to describe the directionless passion of her later character Daniel Deronda. Without a vocation, Dorothea's ambition turns inward, and she becomes self-conscious of her desire to be selfless; Eliot refuses to affirm this shallow and egoistic kind of ambition.

In *Daniel Deronda*, however, Eliot tries yet another combination of ambition and vocation. Daniel, an orphan raised as a Christian and trained in law, has little ambition to do great things on his own, but he does have some abstract idea of a desire to do kind things for others. He inherits from the avid Jewish scholar Mordecai both ambition and vocation – as Mordecai's mentee, Daniel adopts the scholar's academic and religious pursuits and uses them to do something both widespread and influential: to found a Jewish nation. With *Deronda*'s masculinity comes the opportunity for education and for something to do with his education and his passions. Again Eliot adopts an idea from Wollstonecraft, who wrote that "the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex" (Wollstonecraft 6), and

Eliot explores this gendered aspect of ambition in her characters. Dinah, Dorothea, and Daniel represent stages in Eliot's philosophy of ambition: ambitious people can be selfless, but only when their ambition stems from sincerity and when they have the proper tools to use that ambition to contribute to some greater goal.

Gender, Eliot suggests, plays an important role in the opportunities allowed her characters: her male character Daniel Deronda realizes his potential much more easily than Dorothea Brooke can; he inherits a profession from another male, the scholar Mordecai. Dorothea, after much fruitless searching, finally finds something worthwhile to do only through partnership with a man, her husband and politician Will Ladislaw. In Dinah's case, however, Eliot refrains from placing any gender constraints upon her ambitious female character, allowing her to live in a community that accepts female preachers, and as a result of that privilege, Dinah encounters no sexism in her career. These issues of gender reflect Eliot's experience living in England in the second half of the 19th century, during the height of the women's suffrage movement and the push for gender equality in education. Literary scholar and historian Allison Mark argues that "the social forces" at play in Eliot's world, "masculine prejudice, inadequate female education, patriarchal double standards – are the very ones that Eliot seeks to expose and critique" in her novels. Eliot does expose and critique them, albeit subtly, in her exploration of ambition and vocation.

These two terms that Eliot uses throughout her novels in relation to many characters warrant some discussion and defining. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "ambition" in the latter half of the 19th century as "the ardent (in early usage, inordinate) desire to rise to high position, or to attain rank, influence, distinction or other preferment," and this definition highlights Eliot's preoccupation: when does an ambitious person's ardor become inordinate? The most common definition of "vocation" during that time period, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "the action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a

spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position; divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp. religious) career; the fact of being so called or directed towards a special work in life; natural tendency to, or fitness for, such work.” The distinction that the Oxford English Dictionary makes between a spiritual calling to a specific function and a person’s “natural tendency” toward that function highlights Eliot’s own emphasis on drawing that distinction in her novels. This definition also reminds us of Eliot’s tendency to place her ambitious characters in religious activities, such as Dorothea’s exaggerated piety, Daniel’s Jewish scholar- and leadership, and Dinah’s preaching.

In *Adam Bede*, Eliot introduces Dinah, a passionate and selfless preacher whose character seems a precursor to Dorothea. Dinah has ambition, but her ambition stems from someplace outside of herself; it does not seem innate to her personality. She believes she has a calling from God to preach and to do good unto others regardless of her own desires; in fact Eliot gives her no desires besides doing good for other people. In addition to this conveniently selfless ardor, Eliot gives Dinah the opportunity to act on her ambition: Dinah becomes a preacher, living out her sincere goals of helping the people around her. Dinah’s desire to preach is not affected or arbitrary; indeed, “the quiet depth of conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message” (*Adam Bede* 32), a message that she believes she translates directly from God, not from a source within herself. Because Eliot places Dinah in a society in which women can preach, and because she gives her the ambition to do exactly what her vocation allows, Dinah’s preaching becomes a genuine and worthwhile focus for her energies. Dinah does not preach “as she ha[s] heard others preach, but speak[s] directly from her own emotions, and under the inspiration of her own simple faith” (*Adam Bede* 32-33), a faith that she receives naturally.

Eliot gives Dinah “a clear call to the work” (*Adam Bede* 98) of ministering, and Dinah does not have to undergo any self-searching or development to find it. Dinah’s ambition seems to originate not from any psychological predetermination but rather from something external that she allows to

fill her. As a child, Dinah “had had [her] heart enlarged to speak” (*Adam Bede* 99), not by her own passions, but by some unseen agent who fills her with religious ambition. Dinah seems an empty vessel without her own personality or psychology, a vessel that gets filled up with the ambition to help others and has no other desires that interfere with that passion. Her eventual husband Adam notices this trait in her: “She’s cut out o’ different stuff from most women: I saw that long ago. She’s never easy but when she’s helping somebody” (*Adam Bede* 534). Eliot makes Dinah’s career an easy choice for her by making her different from most women and giving her no ambitions besides her untiring aspirations to help people in need. Without the clear calling to ministry, Dinah would have nothing to do with the religious ardor that fills her, but Eliot provides her with an opportunity to use it.

The vocation Eliot gives Dinah exactly overlaps with her ambition, allowing Dinah an opportunity to use all of her energy, because without something to do, Eliot suggests that that energy would turn inward, becoming self-centered and unproductive. When describing her road to the ministry, Dinah explains “when I’m not greatly wrought upon, I’m too much given to sit still and keep by myself; it seems as if I could sit silent all day long with the thought of God overflowing my soul” (*Adam Bede* 99). If Dinah sat alone, letting herself “forget where [she is] and everything about [her], and lose [her]self in thoughts” (*Adam Bede* 99), her passion would become a closed circuit with no opportunity for interaction with or sympathy for others, lost in her own thoughts. Without exerting herself and using her energies for other people, Dinah would make no impact on the world, and Eliot seems to disapprove of that waste of passion, so she lets Dinah do something with it. She gives it to her without Dinah having to struggle to find it: Dinah gets “wrought upon” rather than having to work herself to find her vocation. Dinah describes her first preaching experience as if she serves as a conduit for spiritual energy: “it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as the tears come, because our hearts are full and

we cannot help it” (*Adam Bede* 99). Dinah simply falls into the perfect vocation for her ambition, an ambition that does not stem from any aspect of her personality, but from an external spiritual calling.

Once Dinah finds the vocation that God (or Eliot) has given her, that vocation provides her with many opportunities to help people around her. The opportunities make themselves apparent to her through a “clear showing of the Lord’s will” (*Adam Bede* 39); they come easily through a connection with God that Eliot affirms. When Dinah first preached, she “felt a great movement in [her] soul, and [she] trembled as if [she] was shaken by a strong spirit entering into [her] weak body” (*Adam Bede* 100), and that spirit moved her to pray with and preach to the people in the village. Here, we can tell that Dinah believes in that deep connection to God that moves her to help her community, and she does not seem self-conscious of her actions. She finds this vocation, a direction for her ambition, as quickly as she receives her calling from God; Eliot does not give Dinah any time to waste her passions. Because she always has something to do with that ambition, she focuses on others, not herself; she does not lose herself in her thoughts as she feared. When leaving Snowfield to preach, Dinah tells Adam, “I feel that I am called back to... the sinful and desolate” (*Adam Bede* 519), and she returns to help people, to extend her sympathies outside of herself. Dinah never describes her intentions to leave as something she desires, in fact she asserts the opposite: she tells her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, “your wish for me to stay is not a call of duty which I refuse to hearken to because it is against my own desires; it is a temptation that I must resist, lest the love of the creature should become like a mist in my soul shutting out the heavenly light” (*Adam Bede* 520). Dinah feels called to help others, to act selflessly, and because of that calling in which she strongly believes, she denies herself her actual desires in order to fulfil her duty.

In filling Dinah with religious ardor, Eliot avoids giving her any individual personality, and Dinah’s preferences do not challenge her perceived duty until she falls in love with Adam Bede.

Dinah's love for him conflicts with her duty to minister to others, a duty that her God affirms but that does not originate in Dinah's psychology itself. Eliot represents Dinah's first selfish, or at least not selfless, feelings in her response to Adam's marriage proposal: "Adam, my heart is drawn strongly towards you; and of my own will, if I had no clear showing to the contrary, I could find my happiness in being near you... [but] I fear I should forget the Divine presence, and seek no love but yours" (*Adam Bede* 554). Dinah's desires pull her to Adam, but she feels a calling from God to resist that will; she fears that focusing her passion on a relationship with Adam would prevent her from fulfilling her duty of helping others. Until Dinah falls in love with Adam, she fully focuses her life and ambitions on other people: "all my peace and my joy have come from having no life of my own, no wants, no wishes for myself, and living only in God and those of his creatures whose sorrows and joys he has given me to know" (*Adam Bede* 554). Dinah's lack of personal ambition makes room for spiritual energy that fills her with outward ambition, and her love for Adam begins to take up some of that space within her, finally giving us a sense of Dinah's personality.

While Eliot gives Dinah the opportunity to easily enact selfless ambition, she acknowledges that not every woman has a clear calling to a specific vocation. Dinah tells her aunt, "We can all be servants of God wherever our lot is cast, but He gives us different sorts of work, according as He fits us for it and calls us to it" (*Adam Bede* 86), and luckily for Dinah, her "sort of work" allows her to help others while fulfilling her own ambition. But not every woman, or person, receives the same lucky opportunity.

This first novel, *Adam Bede*, illustrates Eliot's preliminary approach to and opinions of ambition, but as she matures as an author, and as she develops her moral philosophy and argument, she experiments with other types of ambition and other possibilities for using it.

Dorothea does not receive the same calling to a specific vocation that Dinah receives from God. She has an ambitious personality and a yearning to do something big. Like Saint Theresa,

Dorothea has an innate desire “to go and seek martyrdom” (*Middlemarch* 3), but unlike Saint Theresa, Dorothea’s geographical and temporal positions – in 19th century England – prevent her from fulfilling that desire. Dorothea’s “passionate, ideal nature demand[s] an epic life” (*Middlemarch* 3); unlike Dinah, Dorothea’s ambition originates in her psychology, not from an outside source. That passion demands a vocation: Dorothea’s ambition, “fed from within, soar[s] after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness” (*Middlemarch* 3). Here, Eliot’s vague gestures toward “some illimitable satisfaction” and “some object” emphasize the futility of Dorothea’s search for some way to use her passion and her naivety in striving toward an invisible, undefined goal.

Explaining Dorothea’s inevitable failure to become a martyr or great heroine, Eliot warns us that Dorothea becomes one of “many Therasas [who] have... found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity” (*Middlemarch* 3). Because of Dorothea’s position as a young, uneducated woman, Eliot suggest her life will lack excitement and be full of failures, not greatness. Eliot avoids placing all of the blame for Dorothea’s naïve and selfish ambition on Dorothea herself; she suggests that Dorothea’s lack of opportunity stems from the fact that “some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women” (*Middlemarch* 3). In this accusation, Eliot suggests that her society’s views of and opportunities for women bear responsibility for women’s inevitably useless lives and mocks the opinion that women’s nature innately consists of “inconvenient indefiniteness.” Women cannot help floundering in their attempts to effect great influence, Eliot suggests; in fact, “we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas” (*Middlemarch* 785) by limiting their opportunities for education and their choices of vocation.

With Dorothea's "passionate, ideal nature" (*Middlemarch* 3) comes a natural inclination to exert her energy, and in her naivety, Dorothea believes that she can find something important to do with her idleness. She tells her first husband's cousin, who will later become her second husband, Will Ladislaw, "I believe devoutly in a natural difference of vocation" (*Middlemarch* 209), and implicit in that assertion lies Dorothea's belief that *she* has a natural vocation. Here, we feel a gentle teasing from Eliot, as if we should pity Dorothea in her naivety rather than deride her for it. Dorothea seems to be trying to stay afloat in her search for a vocation, telling her husband that people "may seem idle and weak because they are growing" (*Middlemarch* 76), not because they are idle or weak by nature, but because they are still looking for something to do with themselves. Dorothea herself is looking for something to do, and she resents seeming idle and weak without a vocation.

In her searching, Dorothea settles upon a poor option for an occupation. She marries the elderly scholar Edward Casaubon not out of love or even out of fondness for him; she marries him because she believes that as his wife, she will find something significant to do with her time. She rationalizes her decision to marry him by imagining the greatness she would do by his side: "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great work. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things" (*Middlemarch* 27). She sets her ambition on studying languages in order to help him with his research, an arbitrary task that placates her resistance to idleness. Again, Eliot encourages us to mock Dorothea's attempt to avoid the "trivial" things about her life and to choose Casaubon merely because he offers tasks that seem great. Dorothea does not decide to help Casaubon because of her influence on the lives of other people or her contribution to anything greater than her own desire for a vocation. She wants merely something to do; it does not matter to her what she does. She hopes that marrying and assisting Mr. Casaubon will give her the direction she desires: "then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England"

(*Middlemarch* 27). Here, Eliot asserts that Dorothea is approaching her ambition in the wrong way: she wants to be great, and it does not matter how. This ambition for greatness is not the type of ambition that Eliot affirms, deriding Dorothea's naivety and suggesting that this ambition that stems not from a spiritual or academic calling, but from a personality that seeks a calling, can only lead to egoism.

Without something real to do, Dorothea focuses her ambition on herself, looking for individuality and opportunities for self-expression. While Dinah focuses her ambition on helping people, Dorothea turns her ambition inward, and the characters around her mock her futile efforts to find an influential vocation. To the people around her, Dorothea's "struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness" (*Middlemarch* 3) as she flits from one aspiration to another, first devoting herself to religious piety, then to Mr. Casaubon's studies. Dorothea searches obsessively for something influential to do, and her family scoffs at her for her insincere aspirations. Her sister Celia teases her, "Poor Dodo.... It is very hard: it is your favorite fad to draw plans" (*Middlemarch* 34), ridiculing the fountainhead of Dorothea's ardor. Dorothea's ambition seems something temporary and superficial, not a genuine desire to help, and Celia suggests that Dorothea satisfies her passions by planning her opportunities to do great things without actually fulfilling them. When asked whether her sister "is given to self-mortification" (*Middlemarch* 17), Celia replies rather astutely, "She likes giving up" (*Middlemarch* 17). Here, Eliot illuminates the selfishness of Dorothea's ambition. She derives pleasure from her own perception of her piety, of the help she will give to Mr Casaubon, and of the good she will do for the poor by building houses for them; she likes depriving herself for the sake of depriving herself, not for any potential positive impact on the lives of others.

Dorothea finds an outlet for her ambition in "excessive religiousness" (*Middlemarch* 35), piety focused in a self-conscious desire to do good things, a desire that Eliot has shown she does not affirm. When Dorothea marries Mr. Casaubon, she finds another channel for her energies, but her

desire to help him stems as much from selfishness as does her affinity for “giving up” (*Middlemarch* 17) things that she likes in the name of religious piety. She hopes Mr. Casaubon will teach her Latin and Greek, believing that “those provinces of masculine knowledge” (*Middlemarch* 59) would help her find something to do, help her “to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian” (*Middlemarch* 59). Dorothea seeks opportunities for activity not to improve the lives of others, but to help her “arrive at the core of things,” things she cannot name, much less fulfill. Helping others becomes a method through which Dorothea can move out of her idleness and inactivity: “she would have preferred... that her home would be in a parish which had a larger share of the world’s misery, so that she might have had more active duties in it” (*Middlemarch* 71). Dorothea wants the people around her to face more misery so that she has more opportunities to help them; her ambition has become inwardly focused and self-centered.

While Eliot refuses to affirm Dorothea’s egoistic ambition, she does not entirely blame Dorothea for her misguided passions. Rather, Eliot suggests that Dorothea’s gender and resultant lack of education preclude any opportunities for meaningful outward action. Eliot suggests that Dorothea recognizes the uselessness of her life, but not knowing exactly what opportunities she lacks, she does not know how to improve her possibilities. Dorothea recognizes “that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better” (*Middlemarch* 782), but she does not know how to be better or how to do better. She has some vague idea of wanting to do good in the world, that “by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we do not quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil” (*Middlemarch* 367). But with limited schooling, Dorothea cannot know what to do and could not do anything with that knowledge if she had it. Dorothea’s position in her society stifles her ability to find a vocation and to define her ambition. Undefined ambition, Eliot suggests, becomes necessarily self-centered, regardless of the intentions of its bearer.

Eliot eventually allows Dorothea to mature, and when faced with the decision to continue Mr. Casaubon's work after his death, Dorothea realizes the futility of his academic pursuits: "is it right, even to soothe his grief – would it be possible, even if she promised – to work as in a treadmill fruitlessly?" (*Middlemarch* 450). Here, Eliot illuminates a moment of growth in Dorothea's approach to ambition. Dorothea finally creates a hierarchy of pursuits; not every possible use of her time produces the same influential result. While Mr. Casaubon's search for the "Key" (*Middlemarch* 449) to scholarship at first seems a worthy pursuit to Dorothea, to the wiser Dorothea it now seems a "doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful" (*Middlemarch* 449), and a waste of energy and ambition. Once Dorothea realizes the futility of Mr. Casaubon's vocation, she finds an outlet for her ambition in her second husband, Will Ladislaw. Only as Ladislaw's wife can Dorothea lead "a life filled... with a beneficent activity" (*Middlemarch* 782), assisting him in his political career to bring reform to their town. Eliot allows Dorothea to alter her previous wish that the people around her would be more miserable so she could help them: now, "Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help" (*Middlemarch* 782). With something on which to focus her ambition – with a vocation – Dorothea's energy rotates outward and becomes less selfish.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot explores a slightly different approach to ambition and vocation. Like Dinah, Daniel receives his ambition from outside himself; it does not seem to stem from his own psychology. He has no desire to do great things as Dorothea does; Daniel "[takes] any second-rateness in himself simply as a fact, not as a marvel necessarily to be accounted for by a superiority" (*Daniel Deronda* 178). Eliot tells us directly that Daniel has little ambition for himself: "'Deronda would have been first-rate if he had had more ambition,' was a frequent remark about him" (*Daniel Deronda* 178). Daniel has no desire to be "first-rate;" he in fact "would rather be the calf than the butcher" (*Daniel Deronda* 178), if being the butcher means that others suffer through his success.

With a personality that predisposes him to be kind, not to be aggressive or driven, Daniel does not have a “will to inflict injuries and climb over them as a ladder, but a hatred of all injury” (*Daniel Deronda* 178). Like Dorothea, Daniel has a vague idea of helping others and fixing the wrongs in the world, but unlike Dorothea, Daniel’s predilection for doing good stems from an innate desire to contribute, not a desire to do influential things.

While Daniel begins his life without a specific ambition, he receives both ambition and a vocation in the work he inherits from Mordecai, a devoted Jewish scholar and Daniel’s mentor and eventual brother-in-law. Like Dorothea, Daniel grows restless in the idleness of his life, and he dreads “that dead anatomy of culture which turns the universe into a mere ceaseless answer to queries” (*Daniel Deronda* 365) that a life without aspiration would become. With his still unused energy, and a desire to do kindnesses for others, Daniel hopes for “some external event, or some inward light, that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy” (*Daniel Deronda* 364). He does not get an “inward light,” but rather an outward light from Mordecai. Mordecai, whose “soul [is] a temple of remembrance where the treasures of knowledge enter” (*Daniel Deronda* 413), gives that knowledge to Daniel, and Daniel’s mind becomes the “temple of remembrance” for Jewish history and philosophy. From Mordecai, Daniel receives both the drive to accomplish something and a concrete goal to work toward: founding a Jewish nation.

With both the ambition and the direction that Mordecai gives him, Daniel finds a vocation. Daniel sets himself on helping the Jewish people in England: “I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done toward restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation” (*Daniel Deronda* 725). Because of Daniel’s masculinity, and the education he receives as an Englishman, he has the capability to pursue his vocation; Eliot leaves us with the sense that nothing will impede Daniel’s pursuits. Daniel receives every advantage with regard to both his ambition and his vocation: Eliot gives him a selfless desire to help people and the means to

do so. Daniel's inherited ambition aligns perfectly with his vocation, and both align with selflessness, leaving no room for egoism.

Eliot's characters experience varying degrees of ambition and varying sources of that ambition, and Eliot gives them distinct opportunities for fulfilling it. Dinah has an outward tug that pulls her toward doing good and toward a vocation focused on helping others, and Eliot affirms Dinah's choices to pursue her ambition. Dorothea has an inward drive for greatness, but helping others sits in a position secondary to Dorothea's personal ambition. Her gender prevents her from finding any way to utilize her ambition, and Eliot asserts the egoism of Dorothea's desires to create change while also blaming Dorothea's circumstances for her ineptitude. Daniel, as a man and as a naturally selfless person, receives opportunities to do influential and helpful things with his energy. In these three characters, Eliot develops her philosophy of ambition and vocation: ambition avoids becoming egoism only when it aligns with a specific vocation and when it stems from innate selflessness. This ideology allows Eliot to justify her own ambition and vocation: Eliot was both ambitious and fortunate – or resourceful – enough to find a profession that allowed her to enact selfless ambition.

We can find similarities between Eliot and many of her female characters in the way they approach their ambition. Eliot identified with Dinah's passion, and in fact, literary critic Margaret Reynolds argues that “the way that Dinah speaks in [*Adam Bede*] was closely connected in Eliot's own mind with the way that she herself wrote – and the way in which she genuinely felt as she wrote” (xxviii). In a letter to her friend Sarah Hennell, Eliot writes: “How curious it seems to me that people should think Dinah's sermons, prayers, and speeches were *copied* – when they were written with hot tears, as they surged up in my own mind!” (Reynolds xxviii). Clearly, Eliot believed that her ambition came from as sincere a place as Dinah's source of passion. However, during difficult moments in her writing, Eliot seems as self-conscious of her progress as Dorothea seems of

her uselessness. While writing *Middlemarch*, Eliot recorded in her journal of September 11, 1869, “I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of Middlemarch” (*Journals* 138), and nearly two weeks later on September 24, her worries had not abated: “It is worthwhile to record my great depression of spirits, that I may remember one more resurrection from the pit of melancholy” (*Journals* 138). At moments like these, Eliot seems preoccupied with writing well, not with effecting positive change with her writing.

When her books sold well and when her readers seemed pleased with her work, Eliot celebrated her successes and recorded moments of pride in her letters and journals. After she published *Middlemarch*, in her journal of May 8, 1872, she wrote “The reception of the book hitherto has been quite beyond what I could have achieved beforehand, people exalting it above everything else I have written” (*Journals* 142). The reception of Eliot’s books mattered greatly to her; she cared what people thought of her work. Three years later, on January 13, 1875, she again expressed her excitement at her books’ positive reception: “The last year has been crowded with proofs of affection for me and of value for what work I have been able to do. This makes the best motive or encouragement to do more” (*Journals* 145). Here, Eliot reveals that others’ opinions of her work create a motivation to continue her career, and that an innate desire to contribute to the literary community plays a secondary role in her ambition. This preoccupation with success seems incongruent with the type of selflessness Eliot affirms in her novels – how does she justify her own ambition?

Eliot balances these moments of pride in her work with expectations of the positive effect her novels will have on her readers. Eliot does not strive merely for praise, indeed, in the same journal entry of January 13, 1875, she expresses her hope that her novels will provide “a contribution to literature and not a mere addition to the heap of books” (*Journals* 145). Eliot distances herself from Dorothea, whom she wrote just a few years before; Dorothea wants simply to

do great things, while Eliot's ambition involves a sincere desire to contribute to her society. Her pride comes not only when her novels sell well or please her readers; it comes when she senses her work has made a meaningful impact on her community. She opened the year 1873 with a remark on the good her novels have done: On January 1, she wrote in her journal "I have received many deeply affecting assurances of [*Middlemarch's*] influence for good on individual minds" (*Journals* 143). The positive influence that Eliot intends for her novels disposes her to selflessness rather than selfishness; her aspirations for the effects of her novels agree with the philosophy of selfless ambition she asserts within them.

In her first novel *Adam Bede*, she had not yet fully articulated her moral philosophy of ambition; and as a result Dinah faces no struggles or growth in her ambition or her vocation; from the beginning to the end of the novel, Dinah remains equally selfless and influential. While Eliot affirms these two attributes, she does not yet test what happens when a person's circumstances prevent her from fulfilling her ambition selflessly in the way Dinah does. She tries out that more precarious situation a decade later in Dorothea, whose personality demands a "spiritual grandeur" (*Middlemarch* 3) but whose circumstances prevent her from enacting any meaningful change in her or anyone else's life. Eliot deploys gender constraints in Dorothea's possibilities of vocation, and begins to explore the reversal of Dinah's ambition: what happens when someone has ambition but cannot use it? It turns inward, becomes focused on the self, and loses all potential for selfless influence. She indirectly addresses gender again in *Daniel Deronda*, giving him a predicament similar to that of Dorothea: a vague desire to do something but no idea of what to do. But because Daniel is a man and has access to an education and to world experience, he can find a real vocation. Like Dorothea, Daniel at first wanders aimlessly without a profession, but unlike Dorothea, an opportunity to help others presents itself in his relationship with Mordecai. Daniel, like Eliot herself, finds something to do.

As a novelist, Eliot positions herself as a moral instructor, intent on educating her readers and advocating selflessness and positive impact. Eliot turns novel-writing into a vocation as worthwhile as preaching or founding a Jewish nation; her profession provides both an outlet for her ambition and a capacity to give to others. Like Dinah and Daniel, Eliot had something meaningful to do. She uses her novels both as a testing ground for her philosophies, by experimenting with various combinations of circumstances, personalities, degrees of ambition, and possible vocations in her characters, and as a platform from which to reach her readers. As Eliot developed her own opinions on what makes a driven person selfish or selfless, she matured as a novelist as well. Eliot used her novels as a way of fulfilling a selfless ambition to improve the moral characters of her readers: as she writes to Charles Bray on July 5, 1859, “If Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally” (Haight 318). Eliot’s novels educate her readers in her philosophy of ambition, and she practiced that philosophy in her career as well: an influential vocation must align with one’s desire to arouse sympathy in others, and that ambition must arise innately from one’s selflessness; otherwise, it does nothing morally.

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