

Fremont Great Books Book Club
Discussion Questions for George Eliot's "Daniel Deronda"
January 25, 2025

1. George Eliot's first epigraph begins, "Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul." Why do you think the author chose to set her story in motion with this poetic warning?
2. Eliot emphasized the idea of "separateness with communication," which is Eliot's term for multiculturalism. How did the theme of maintaining an individual's ethnic identity weave throughout "Daniel Deronda?" More specifically, how would you characterize Eliot's depiction of Jewish people and their cultural and religious heritage? Was the viewpoint typical of the Victorian era?
3. Consider how the principal characters in the novel – the Mallingers, the Meyricks, Gwendolen, Grandcourt, Mirah, and Mordecai – view Daniel Deronda. Do these views contrast with the way he views himself? How do his self-image and his aspirations change over the course of the novel?
4. A fictional character from an 1876 piece Henry James wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly*, noted that "Gwendolen Harleth is a masterpiece. She is known, felt, and presented, psychologically, altogether in the grand manner. Beside her and beside her husband – a consummate picture of English brutality refined and distilled (for Grandcourt is before all things brutal) – Deronda, Mordecai, and Mirah are hardly more than shadows." What is your opinion of James' assessment?
5. Daniel Deronda's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, tells her son, "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." Consider the female characters in the novel, including Gwendolen, Mrs. Glasher, Mirah, and the princess. What is their place in Victorian society, and how do they deal with their limited options? What gives Catherine Arrowpoint the strength to defy her parents and marry Herr Klesmer?
6. On his wedding day, Daniel receives a letter from Gwendolen that repeats her emotional claim: "It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you." Do you think this is true? How would you describe the complex relationship between Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda?
7. How does Eliot explore the themes of social class, power, and respectability in the novel?
8. How do the characters in Eliot's novel achieve a meaningful life (specifically in relation to one's calling)?
9. What does the novel say about people who choose selfish actions over selfless actions?

LINKS & RESOURCES

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/45821/daniel-deronda-by-george-eliot-introduction-by-edmund-white/9780307430878/readers-guide/>

<https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Daniel-Deronda/themes/>