The Lifted Veil

An Exceptional Piece for Eliot

According to contemporary and modern critics, The Lifted Veil was least like George Eliot's style. George Eliot usually wrote realistic prose and poetry, not dealing much with the occult beliefs, such as clairvoyance. The Lifted Veil is the only one of Eliot's works that does deal heavily with these supernatural subjects. Morality and sympathy play important roles in Eliot's work, the role of sympathy is followed by insight. But in The Lifted Veil, ignorance would accompany sympathy, because if we could have true insight into each others minds we would be disgusted by what we find and be anything but sympathetic.

Major Themes

Rational Science vs. Pseudoscience/Supernatural

Pseudo-science’s are various methods and theories that are considered to have no scientific basis, like astrology or clairvoyance. Phrenology, a type of pseudoscience that involves predictions of personality traits based on skull measurements, was a widely used and regarded practice during the stories time period. In the story, a phrenologist tells Latimer’s father that his son would lack strength in categorization and analytical skills, and Latimer does indeed turn out to be disinclined towards mathematical and scientific methods of calculation and reasoning. This is an instance of an irrational pseudo-science (phrenology), correctly predicting an outcome. Usually, when a pseudo-science works, a supernatural force is implied or suggested. What makes this even more interesting is the fact that the irrational science predicted Latimer to be inadequate in the areas of the rational sciences. At the end of the story, a blood transfusion performed on a recent corpse by Latimer’s childhood friend from Geneva brings the corpse back to life. This is an instance of a rational science causing a supernatural occurrence. In both examples, the supernatural is involved.

[DQ] What is Eliot saying about the relationship between the different scientific philosophies and the supernatural?

Extra-Sensory Perception

Latimer has two extra-senses. One is the ability to read minds; understanding people’s true intentions and motives. The other is foresight. Latimer has a specific and detailed vision of Prague before he had ever been there or even had any specific attitudes or beliefs towards it.

At first, these visions and penetrations into the minds and thoughts of other people come sparingly and sporadically to Latimer. He doesn’t know whether they are true moments of some strange insight or if there is something wrong with him, some type of disease or brain condition. However, his extra-sensory perceptions eventually became regular and frequent. The only person whose intentions he cannot decipher is his wife, Bertha, and this is actually the main reason for his initial attraction to her. Her mind is eventually revealed to him piece-by-piece.

[DQ] Is Latimer’s extra-sensory capabilities a gift or a curse? Could Latimer have changed the way his adult life turned out had he approached his talents differently?

Trust/Distrust of Others

Latimer doesn’t truly trust anybody in the short story; perhaps this may be because he knows what they are all thinking. He doesn’t trust or like his father for most of the story because of his father’s attitude towards him during his childhood. Latimer doesn’t trust his brother because his brother patronizes him and treats him as an inferior. Although he is in love with Bertha, he doesn’t completely trust her because he can’t see through her ‘veil.’ Bertha doesn’t trust Latimer because she feels that she can sense Latimer’s powers and she is uncomfortable with him having the ability to read her mind. This distrust eventually leads her to develop a plan to poison Latimer.

[DQ] Who is trustworthy in the short story? Does anyone have a consistently trustful attitude towards another character?

Bertha’s Veil

Bertha was the only person that Latimer crossed who, for some reason, he was unable to figure out, that is, he couldn’t see into her mind and “know” her like he could “know” everybody else. This “veil” of Bertha’s begins to lift after Latimer’s father’s death. She’s uncomfortable around him because she can sense that he has this power, and this is why she avoids him so much and what causes their marriage to disintegrate.

Her veil is completely lifted at the end when the housekeeper comes back to life and reveals Bertha’s plot to poison Latimer. Latimer is eventually, sometime after their marriage, able to see into Bertha similarly to the way he could with other people. However, each time that he finds out something very significant about her and her thoughts, it’s because of someone besides Latimer and his mind-reading capabilities (her father’s death; the “re-birth” of Mrs. Archer). Only through other people does Bertha’s veil really get lifted. There was something about Bertha that he truly wasn’t able to figure out, which makes Bertha that much more interesting of a character.

[DQ] What is the reason behind Latimer’s inability of seeing into Bertha the way he can in everybody else? Does she have a power of her own? If so, was Latimer enabling her power over him or was he helpless against it?

Character List

Latimer
The main character of the story, Latimer, is plagued by his unnatural sight into the minds of others. Despite this ability, he is unable to foster positive human connections, even though it was what he yearned for at the beginning. Latimer was abandoned by his mother, shipped away by his father, alienated by his brother, and tormented by his lover (Bertha). Click here to see some of Latimer's philosophies expanded upon.

“I was hungry for human deeds and human emotions” (6).

“I was too completely swayed by the sense that I was in the grasp of unknown forces, to believe in my power of self-release. Towards my own destiny I had become entirely passive; for my one ardent desire had spent itself, and impulse no longer predominated over knowledge” (33).

[ ] Latimer talks about how he was able to see all around Bertha's soul, why didn't he know about her murderous plots?

Bertha

An enchanting young woman who is first introduced as the adopted niece of Mrs. Filmore who is Latimer's father's neighbor. She is briefly betrothed to Alfred but after his death marries Latimer instead. Latimer is obsessed with Bertha who for quite some time is the only individual who's mind he cannot easily read. She soon reveals to Latimer her apathy and hatred.

“[Her] features were sharp, the pale grey eyes at once acute, restless, and sarcastic. They were fixed on me in half-smiling curiosity, and I felt a painful sensation as if a sharp wind were cutting me. The pale-green dress, and the green leaves that seemed to form a border about her pale blond hair, made me think of a Water-Nixie” (11).

[ ] Though he wasn't able to fully infiltrate Bertha's mind yet, Latimer got the notion early on that Bertha didn't love his brother and that she had ulterior motives or hidden thoughts towards Alfred and their relationship. Do you think that Bertha had any malicious plans towards Alfred/his family once they were to be married?

Alfred

Latimer's brother, Alfred, is the son of their father's first marriage to Alfred's mother. Alfred who is twenty-six educated at Eton and Oxford and is described as being quite the opposite of Latimer. Latimer despises his brother and is jealous of his romantic connection to Bertha. Alfred dies before he marries Bertha however leaving Latimer free to chase her affections.

“now a handsome self-confident man- a thorough contrast to [me]. [He] came before me as a prefect stranger. He had the superficial kindness of a good-humored, self-satisfied nature, that fears no rivalry, and has encountered no contrarieties” (14).

Latimer's Father

Latimer's father is forty-five years old and has outlived two wives, the first was with Alfred's mother, the second with Latimer's mother. Latimer was always timid in his presences, more due to Latimer's "sensitive nature."

Latimer's father hoped that Alfred would take over the business after he was gone, which truly disappoints him when Alfred dies. His father soon warms up to Latimer after Alfred died, even excepting Latimer's proposal to his brother's widow, Bertha.

“He was a firm, unbending, intensely orderly man, in root and stem a banker, but with a flourishing graft of the active landholder, aspiring to country influence: one of these people who are always like themselves from day to day, who are uninfluenced by the weather, and neither know melancholy nor high spirits” (5).

[ ] How has Latimer's father affected who Latimer has become? Was Latimer born with a disinclination towards the rational sciences or did his childhood influence the type of person he developed into? How might the inclusion of phrenology into the plot suggest he was born with his irrationality?

Charles Meunier
A childhood friend of Latimer's, Charles is arguably the only character with which Latimer is able to foster a close relationship. The two are described as being complete opposites. Latimer implies that he befriended Charles out of pity due to his low social status and poor looks. Later in the plot, we are reintroduced to Charles who is now a renowned doctor. With Latimer's help he brings the maid, Mrs. Archer, back to life for a few moments using a blood transfusion.

"The bond was not an intellectual one; it came from a source that can happily blend the stupid with the brilliant, the dreamy with the practical: it came from community of feeling" (8).

Mrs. Archer

The maid that Bertha hires after her marriage to Latimer. It is she who receives the blood transfusion at the end of the story.

Mrs. Filmore

A neighbor of Latimer's father who first introduces her adoptive niece, Bertha, to Latimer's family.

Mr. Letherall

A man hired by Latimer's father to do phrenological testing on Latimer to see how best to instruct and educate the young man. Although a minor character he could be responsible for the path Latimer's life takes.
Latimer's Philosophies

Latimer is a very quiet and thoughtful character. His philosophical moments are very important to his character and the story as a whole. Below are a few close readings of these philosophies:

A poet pours forth his song and believes in the listening ear and answering soul, to which his song will be floated sooner or later. But the poet’s sensibility without his voice – the poet’s sensibility that finds no vent but in silent tears on the sunny bank, when the noonday light sparkles on the water, or in an inward shudder at the sound of harsh human tones, the sight of a cold human eye – this dumb passion brings with it a fatal solitude of soul in the society of one’s fellowmen.”(7)

Latimer finds that he doesn’t excel in any professional or academic areas. He lacks in any scientific and mathematical skills, and although he has the sensibility of a poet, he does not have creative prowess with words that a good poet must have. At this point in the story, Latimer doesn’t know what his purpose is, or even what it could possibly be, since he doesn’t seem to harbor any true talent or excel in anything as an individual. This lack of ability and distinctiveness causes a deep loneliness for Latimer. However, he does eventually realize how he differs from everybody when he discovers his extra-sensory capabilities. For a time being, this is beneficial for him because he see’s why he is unique, what separates him from everybody else. However, his uniqueness ultimately leads him to an even lonelier life than he had before.

My self-consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it.(24)

Latimer is just discovering his extra-sensory capabilities, learning what separates him from everybody else, and still finds ways to feel bad for himself when there is not yet reason to. As much as he yearned for something that would set him apart from everyone else, not long after discovering what that distinctive factor was, he feels worse for himself and even more isolated than he previously did.

It is a dreary thing to live on doing the same things year after year, without knowing why we do them. Perhaps the tragedy of disappointed youth and passion is less piteous than the tragedy of disappointed age and worldliness.(28)

Latimer is more miserable as an adult than he was during his youth and childhood. In his youth he was practically shunned by his father, eclipsed by his brother, and unsure of his importance and place in the world. As an adult, he had finally gained acceptance from his diseased father, had married his brother’s fiancee, and knew what made him different from everybody else… but he was still less happy than he was as a child. His capabilities have helped him gain knowledge and “worldliness,” they have also widened the gap of correlation between him and his fellow man.

Medical and Scientific References

Phrenology

Phrenology was developed by Franz Joseph Gall who believed that the brain could be sectioned off into 27 portions each representing a distinct characteristic or ability in a person. He believed each person had unique strengths and weaknesses and that a person’s skull could be examined in order to assess which attributes were larger and therefore stronger or smaller and therefore weaker in a person’s character. Eliot swore off religion at an early age and quickly began making connections in the scientific world and was deeply influenced by popular science.

“Mr. Letherall was a large man in spectacles, who one day took my small head between his large hands, and pressed it here and there in an exploratory, suspicious manner - then placed each of his great thumbs on my temples, and pushed me a little way from him, and stared at me with glittering spectacles” (6).
Blood Transfusions

The first documented successful blood transfusion from one human to another occurred in 1818 under the hand of James Blundell. Blundell was an obstetrician who had spent years trying to find a cure for the postpartum hemorrhaging from which many of his patients died. He would take blood from a husband and using a syringe would inject it into the wife. Many doctors searched for more effective ways to transfuse blood but blood types had not yet been discovered. Blundell successfully transfused blood several times over the course of his career. These revolutionary medical advancements had a great impact on the literature of the time - most notably Bram Stoker's horror story, Dracula. See a picture of Blundell's invention - the impellor - below in the image gallery.

“It was my task at first to keep up the artificial respiration in the body after the transfusion had been effected...I could see the wondrous slow return of life; the breast began to heave, the inspiration became strong, the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them” (41).


Monomania and Masturbation
The Victorian Era is known for its repressive views of sexuality. Masturbation was considered to be extremely dangerous for one's psychological well being and it was believed that engaging in it would lead to monomania, warped perception and severe psychological and physical damage. Although it is never explicitly alluded to in the text it has been argued that Eliot was making a social statement about the dangers of onanism in this short story. Latimer's singular obsession with Bertha combined with his quickly dissolving health and mental stability could be interpreted as a warning of the curse that comes from engaging in this dangerous act.


The Cruel-Eyed Woman - Lucrezia Borgia

At one point in the story Latimer falls under the spell of a portrait he views while in Vienna. After staring at this portrait he feels, "a strange poisoned sensation, as if [he] had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects" (19). The painting which was then believed to be by 15th century Italian painter Giorgione shares a striking similarity to many other Renaissance depictions of the infamous Lucrezia Borgia. Lucrezia was the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander VI and known for her beauty and sexuality. As a symbol of sexual desire and female seduction in her time, Lucrezia's inclusion in Eliot's story was certainly intentional. Soon after Latimer sees the painting he has a vision of Bertha as his wife in the future and describes her as having "cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress" (19) - quite similar to the portrait referenced in the story. This intensifies the themes of sexuality, gender and lust that are so prevalent in this short story. Eliot's views of sexuality and gender can be interpreted in many different ways. See further reading listed below.

[FF] It was later discovered that the painting referenced in the story was more likely by an Italian painter named Bartolomeo Veneto rather than Giorgione as assumed by George Eliot and others at that time. The woman depicted in the painting is also still unverified.


Image Gallery
A statue of Eliot at Nuneaton

Giorgione's “Laura”

Eliot's Grave

James Blundell's Impellor
Who is George Eliot?
George Eliot was born as Mary Ann(e) Evans. Born in Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, on November 22, 1819, Eliot was brought up with a strong evangelical piety, she attended the Holy Trinity Church with her father, but soon rejected her faith, it is said, because of her intellectual mind. When Eliot moved to London later in her life, she got a job as an assistant editor at The Westminster Review, a position given to very few women at the time. She was smack dab in the literary circle, where she met her life companion, George Henry Lewis. The two moved to Germany in 1854. Their unorthodox partnership caused some scandal; George Lewis was actually married the entire time he was with Eliot, unable to obtain a divorce from his wife. Evans’ family disowned her because of her informal living arrangements. Lewis died in 1878, two years later Eliot married John Cross, an American banker. Before she died, her family finally accepted her back into the family and acknowledged the marriage to Cross.

George Eliot was actually a woman born with the name Mary Anne Evans. When she was a little girl she would usually shorten it to Marian Evans and even published a few pieces under this alternative. Although she never married Lewis, her long time partner who was married to another woman, she would often use the title of Mrs. Mary Lewis to avoid public scrutiny. While working for The Westminster Review she often published under the title of Georg e Eliot, her most infamous alias since it was a man’s name. A couple of years after Lewis’s death, she married John Cross and became Mrs. Mary Anne Cross. Thus ending her crisis of identity at five names, only two of which were legally acknowledged; Mary Anne Evans, and Mary Anne Cross.
PBS Series "A Scandalous Life"
Journal Articles


Additional Web-Based Resources

Victorian Web
This is a great website for all things Victoria. The site includes information on Victorian literature, gender, science, politics, art and fashion.

Phrenology.com
A website on the legitimacy of phrenology - shows how phrenology is still practiced by some.

Gender, Health, Medicine & Sexuality - Victorian England
A great website dedicated to historical and cultural information on the 19th century.

History of Blood Transfusions
An interesting look at the history of blood transfusions.

NNDB - Lucrezia Borgia
A biographical database entry for Lucrezia Borgia.

History of Blood Transfusions (with pictures)
A great PDF version on an article on the history of blood transfusions. Make sure to check out pages 24-26 which have some great information on James Blundell and pictures of his inventions.
Translation “The Life of Jesus Critically Examined” Vol. 2 by David Strauss (1846); Translation “The Essence of Christianity” by Ludwig Feuerbach (1854); “Scenes of Clerical Life” (1858); A dam Bede (1859); “The Lifted Veil” (1859); The Mill on the Floss (1860); Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe (1861); Romola (1863); “Brother Jacob” (1864); E elix Hoyt, the Radical (1866); “The Spanish Gypsy” (1868); “Agatha” (1869); “Armgart” (1871); Middlem arch (1871-72); “Stradivarius” (1873); “The Legend of Jubal” and “A Minor Prophet” (1874); Da niel Deronda (1876); “A College Breakfast Party” and “The Death of Moses” also “Impressions of Theophrastus Such” (1879)

- Many of George Eliot's pieces can be read digitally on Google Books.