

## About This Volume

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Given the scope and richness of George Eliot's work, compiling a collection of scholarship on her oeuvre is a task not unlike preparing the *Key to All Mythologies*. I am grateful to the scholars who have contributed essays to this project and shared in this labor. All of the essays here are new and offer various approaches to material both familiar and not. Most Eliot scholarship addresses her novels. In this collection, we include critical approaches to her poetry, journalism, and shorter fiction, as well as her novels. This volume also contains essays working in queer historiography, masculinity studies, adaptation studies, and pedagogy. The Critical Insights series is designed for readers new to the author, and we have been careful to note various theoretical approaches and starting places for further explorations.

*Critical Insights: George Eliot* is divided into four sections: an introductory section, a "Critical Contexts" section, a "Critical Readings" section, and a "Resources" section. The introduction uses an adaptation for children to consider what we value in Eliot's work and why we would want to share it with readers of all ages. Joanne Cordón's biography of Eliot traces both her personal and literary developments and offers context for her literature. Using Eliot's own words, Cordón writes that the exercise of writing Eliot's biography "ploughed up her heart." The "Resources" section at the end offers a basic chronology of Eliot's life, as well as a list of her major works. It also includes a bibliography of secondary sources for further reading and research.

The "Critical Contexts" section of the collection takes four approaches to Eliot's work. In "Edith Simcox on George Eliot: Autobiography of a Love," Constance M. Fulmer approaches Eliot via her contemporary, Edith Simcox, a woman who knew and loved Eliot. In her own writing Edith Simcox provides many biographical details about Eliot's life; Fulmer's discussion of her love for Eliot

provides a queer dimension or introduces the presence of queerness. Incidentally, it was upon hearing Fulmer's paper on Edith Simcox at a British Women Writers Association conference that my friend, eighteenth-century scholar Karen L. Cajka, laughed at me for not knowing that George Eliot could have a mean streak. Katherine Montwieler and Mark Edelman Boren took on the task of wading through a century and a half of scholarship on Eliot and compiled their findings in their overview, "Critical Tipples: Or, A Nip into George Eliot Criticism, *Then and Now*." Jeffrey E. Jackson's "Reaching the Limit: *Middlemarch*, George Eliot, and the 'Crisis' of the 'Old-Fashioned English Novel' in the 1870s" is a study in genre and considers the role of *Middlemarch* in the context of the English novel tradition. Lastly, Magdalena Nerio reads Eliot in light of her intellectual predecessors (and subjects of one of Eliot's own essays) Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller.

The "Critical Readings" section consists of new essays from a variety of approaches. In "Life, Death, and Identity in *The Lifted Veil*: George Eliot's Experiments with First-Person Fiction," Heidi L. Pennington looks at Eliot's rare use of the first-person point of view in her discussion of *The Lifted Veil* and autothanatography, or the narration of one's own death. Janis Chakars explores Eliot's journalism in "Mary Ann Evans, Marian Evans, George Eliot, and Journalism," which has only been examined as such by a few scholars. Carroll Clayton Savant's "'Whistle While You Work': The Construction of the Myth of Englishness through the Working Soundscapes in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*" connects sound, class, and the production of nation. Wendy S. Williams, author of *George Eliot, Poetess*, examines Eliot's poetry in light of sympathy (which others in this volume argue she does in her various other genres) in "George Eliot: Unsung Poet of Sympathy."

Gareth Hadyk-DeLodder's essay, "'The world must be romanticized': Tracing George Eliot's German Influences," makes connections amongst the influences of Eliot's extensive German studies and her own writing. In "Doubt, Devotion, Duty: George Eliot, the Death of God, and the Quest to Combine Transcendence and Coherence," Shandi Stevenson examines religion in a number

of Eliot's narratives. While many critics have worked with George Eliot's representations of women, masculinity has not been focused upon nearly as much. Danny Sexton's "'How was a Man to be Explained?': Masculinity, Manhood, and Mothering in *Silas Marner*" corrects this and contributes to not only Eliot studies but masculinity studies as well. Another essay on mothering, Emilia Halton-Hernandez's "Missing Mother: Eliot's Philosophy of Sympathy and the Effect of Loss in *The Lifted Veil*" looks at one of Eliot's shorter fictions. Erin A. Spampinato takes on *Middlemarch* and the role of mythology in the novel in "'Casaubon's 'Highly Esteemed ... Fable of Cupid and Psyche'; Or, Can We Take Myth Seriously in *Middlemarch*?" Lastly, Abigail Burnham Bloom discusses pedagogical approaches in using a film version of Eliot's work in her classroom in "What Can Be Learned from an Adaptation of *The Mill on the Floss*."

One goal of this series is to introduce readers to the work of and scholarship on a particular author. When it comes to George Eliot and her work (remember, the subtitle to *Middlemarch* is "A Study of Provincial Life," and her body of work approximates a panorama of the human experience), it is impossible to be comprehensive. Reading these essays has helped me continue to come to a fuller understanding and appreciation of Eliot and her work. I hope that this collection not only offers useful resources and starting places, but inspires your own explorations with the work of George Eliot.

# Missing Mother: Eliot's Philosophy of Sympathy and the Effect of Loss in *The Lifted Veil*

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Emilia Halton-Hernandez

Criticism of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859) has tended to focus on the supernatural and pseudoscientific elements of the novella. More recently, Jane Wood has shifted attentions to the gendered discourses at play in the narrative. However, I would like to approach *The Lifted Veil* by drawing attention to the loss of the maternal figure in the text. I think that a deeper understanding of Eliot's conceptions of melancholia, egoism, and her philosophy of sympathy can be gained through this type of analysis. From a close reading of *The Lifted Veil*, I will first identify the specters of Latimer's idealized mother that permeate the text. I will then explore the ways in which such an absence or loss might have affected Latimer's representation of women in the novel and his relationship with his male relatives, also referring to what is known about Eliot's own familial experiences. Next, I will interrogate the ways in which Eliot's portrayal of Latimer's melancholy and egoism closely parallels Freud's later notions of such a condition in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). I will also look at the ways Eliot's notion of the development of the psyche and the importance of childhood experience to this development influenced and broke away from contemporary understandings. Finally, with these insights in mind I will question how Eliot's notions of maternal loss, melancholia, and egoism play into her philosophy of sympathy and human intersubjectivity.

## The Significance of Maternal Loss

Latimer—Eliot's misanthropic character, who presents us with his sorry autobiography—details the course of his life, from his early origins in England (we presume) to the greater part of his adolescence in Geneva, back to his adulthood in England. Although he speaks fondly of his early childhood with his mother, he furnishes the narrative with few real details of this period, instead providing a

somewhat cursory glance at such a formative period. His childhood remains the happiest time by which other periods in his life are compared: “My softened feeling towards my father made this the happiest time I had known since childhood” (Eliot, *Lifted* 28). The main reason for his childhood happiness, he explains, is his “tender mother,” who provides him with an “unequaled love” (4). He describes longingly the comfort he derived from her physical presence, one that contained and loved him:

even now, after the dreary lapse of long years, a slight trace of sensation accompanies the remembrance of her caress as she held me on her knee—her arms round my little body, her cheek pressed on mine. I had a complaint of the eyes that made me blind for a little while, and she kept me on her knee from morning till night. (Eliot, *Lifted* 4)

Echoing the second stanza of ‘Life’ from Eliot’s poem ‘Self and Life’ (1878), Ruby Redinger reads it as “one of her most personal utterances” (Redinger 43). Eliot writes: “I was thy warmth upon thy mother’s knee/When light and love within her eyes were one;/ We laughed together by the laurel-tree,/ Culling warm daisies ‘neath the sloping sun” (Eliot qtd. in Redinger 43). Here, Eliot is emphasizing the importance of the mother-child relationship to the development of the Self. It is worth noting that Redinger describes these lines as a “remarkable recall of symbiotic love; the child is not distinct from the mother, but an actual part of her sentient being” (Redinger 43), whereas in Latimer’s description of his mother’s love, he does not seem to partake in this organic union. Instead, his mother gazes upon him, bestowing him with affection, which he recalls missing. During Latimer’s temporary blindness, he relies solely on his mother’s love and gaze, but we get no sense of his returning her affections. Latimer is, in fact, aware of how he may be idealizing his childhood and the mother figure of this period. He writes that “My childhood perhaps seems happier than it really was, by contrast with all the after-years” (Eliot, *Lifted* 4). Similarly, in a letter to Sarah Hennell in 1844, Eliot writes that “Childhood is only the beautiful and happy time in contemplation and retrospect—to the child it

is full of deep sorrows, the meaning of which is unknown” (Eliot qtd. in Redinger 50). Latimer’s idealization of his childhood and the mother figure from this period suggests that Eliot is drawing attention to an idealization that is most probably due to the early maternal loss Latimer suffers. Such a love:

soon vanished out of my life, and even to my childish consciousness it was as if that life had become more chill. I rode my little white pony with the groom by my side as before, but there were no loving eyes looking at me as I mounted, no glad arms opened to see me when I came back. Perhaps I missed my mother’s love more than most children of seven or eight would have done, to whom the other pleasures of life remained as before; for I was certainly a very sensitive child. (Eliot, *Lifted* 4)

Throughout the narrative of *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot portrays the effects of maternal loss on the adult psyche with relation to her own experiences of loss. Redinger and U. C. Knoepfmacher have drawn attention in their biographical sketches of Eliot to both how the author and Latimer suffered from the same effects of maternal deprivation and neglect. Though her mother died in Eliot’s own adulthood, accounts from both Eliot herself and her biographer John Cross describe the early withdrawal of both warmth and availability from Christiana Evans. As a young child, Eliot became estranged from her mother, sent to school far from the family home, despite her mother’s ‘pet’—Eliot’s older brother Isaac—being permitted to stay (Knoepfmacher 108). From early on, Eliot had an instinctive recognition that “she occupied at best second place in the affections of her mother, the fountainhead of her very life” (Redinger 39). As Knoepfmacher observes, her portraits of inadequate mothers throughout her novels suggest that Eliot indeed “never fully weathered the withdrawal, at such an early stage of development, of that maternal “warmth” she poignantly dramatized in “Self and Life” (Knoepfmacher 108). However, unlike Eliot, who partnered with G. H. Lewes and who was able both to give and receive love, Latimer’s mother remains the only person in the narrative whom he feels loved by, and whom he can remember without the usual

disillusionment or contempt others produce in him. His father's inability to mourn his wife's death is deeply troubling for Latimer. Indeed, he can only feel compassion and sympathy when they both participate in a long overdue period of mourning when his brother dies: "As I saw into the desolation of my father's heart, I felt a movement of deep pity towards him, which was the beginning of a new affection—an affection that grew and strengthened in spite of the strange bitterness with which he regarded me" (Eliot, *Lifted* 28).

It is significant that Latimer's father is portrayed in stark contrast to the unknown and idealized mother figure. Whereas he recollects his mother as providing unfaltering affection and warmth, his father was a "firm, unbending, intensely orderly man, in root and stem a banker" whose disapproval of his youngest son's effeminate nature is resented by Latimer (Eliot, *Lifted* 5). Nonetheless, Latimer's feelings towards his father are linked to real experiences and events, whereas his mother is more a concept rather than a fully realized person. In a startling image of male and paternal potency, Latimer describes the "mingled trepidation and delicious excitement" he felt when he heard "the trampling of the horses on the pavement in the echoing stables, by the loud resonance of the grooms' voices, by the booming bark of the dogs as my father's carriage thundered under the archway of the courtyard" (5). In comparison to his memories of "riding the little white pony" associated with his mother, the contrast between benign mother and malignant father is heightened. Again, critics have likened such an uncompromising paternal figure as resembling Eliot's own misgivings about her father's unbending personality. Latimer's complicated relationship with his father is expressed in his clairvoyant vision of Prague, showing the ways in which such preoccupations with familial ties pervade the text. Rather than his vision of Prague providing an extra eye of insight, the scene at the bridge is primarily characterized by his disturbance at the lifelessness of the fatherly statues: "It is such grim, stony beings as these, I thought, who are the fathers of ancient faded children ... who worship wearily in the stifling air of the churches, urged by no fear or hope" (9).

Such a split in Latimer's affections and perceptions of those around him is heightened in his relationship to Bertha, the monster to Latimer's mother's angel. The maternal ideal induced by loss also illuminates Latimer's portrayal of Bertha in the novella. As critics Gilbert and Gubar have observed, the splitting of characteristics between two women is a common approach to the paradox of femininity, often produced by a lost, idealized mother (Gilbert & Gubar 244). Latimer's mother's love is likened to tender nature: "it seemed to me that the sky, and the glowing mountain-tops, and the wide blue water, surrounded me with a cherishing love such as no human face had shed on me since my mother's love had vanished out of my life" (Eliot, *Lifted* 7). Whereas Bertha is the demonic nixie, the "fatal-eyed woman, with the green weeds, looked like a birth from some cold, sedgy stream, the daughter of an aged river" (12). Indeed, Latimer himself compares Bertha to the characteristics of the pure, angelic woman, whose only manifestation in the text is in the form of his remembered mother. Bertha, he tell us, was:

was the very opposite, even to the colour of her hair, of the ideal woman who still remained to me the type of loveliness; and she was without the enthusiasm for the great and good, which, even at the moment of her strongest dominion over me, I should have declared to be the highest element of character. (Eliot, *Lifted* 17)

Bertha is "a bearer of meaning" for Latimer rather than a "maker of meaning" in the novella, acting as the archetypal Lucrezia Borgia femme fatale that Latimer holds in both disdain and erotic fascination (Dever 166). Although both Carolyn Dever and Gilbert and Gubar think about the angel/monster split as more representative of a trope in Victorian fiction due to the pervading gendered stereotypes of the time, I think Eliot is also demonstrating a nuanced psychological understanding of the ways in which something like maternal loss might affect our conceptions of sexuality and subjectivity. As I will go on later to explore, Eliot was influential in the late nineteenth century with regards to her understanding of childhood experiences and its effect upon adult life.

## The Portrait of a Melancholic

Latimer is disturbed by his father's inability to mourn, or at least to show any signs of the loss he remembers so painfully: "he married my mother soon after; and I remember he seemed exactly the same, to my keen childish observation, the week after her death as before. But now, at last, a sorrow had come" (Eliot, *Lifted* 27). But Latimer is also unable to mourn properly and closely resembles Freud's conception of the melancholic in his seminal 1917 work, "Mourning and Melancholia." Though theories of melancholia had advanced considerably in the nineteenth century to an interest in non-delusional melancholia, Freud broke away from previous explanations of the emotions by emphasizing psychic loss rather than physical imbalance or defect (Lawlor 45). For example, in 1883, an Edinburgh physician defined melancholia as a form of mental disease that would usually run "a somewhat definite course, like a fever" (Coulston, qtd. in Jansson 1). Freud, on the other hand, departed from this model by explaining how the lost object of the melancholic became established within the ego: "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object" (Freud 249). Indeed, Eliot's protagonist shares many of the same characteristics as Freud's prototypical melancholic, demonstrating a prescience on Eliot's behalf in her nuanced and sophisticated portrayal of the condition. The melancholic—as opposed to the mourner, who has been able to give up the lost object—is unabashedly communicative with regards to his feelings of lack of self-worth: "One might emphasize the presence in him of an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure" (Freud 248). Latimer continually reminds the reader of his inadequacies, almost to the point of indulging in self-flagellation. He compares himself to his brother as a "fragile, nervous, ineffectual self" (Eliot 14) and such self-reproaches characterize the text. In fact, one could consider Latimer's autobiographical account itself as a performative exercise in self-exposure. Masochism's counterpart, sadism, is also prevalent in Latimer's account of his relations, as with humiliating his brother and refusing to relinquish Bertha

from a failed marriage. Freud writes that the “The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object” (Freud 251). That this melancholic state is triggered by loss, but that this is not necessarily known by the sufferer is a crucial component to the phenomenology of both Latimer and Freud’s patient’s melancholia: “the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious” (Freud 245).

Eliot, in her inclusion of Latimer’s “vanished” mother provides the protagonist with the loss that might have affected him so profoundly in childhood and beyond. In *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot is engaging with different notions of the time as to the origins of adult disturbances and the theory of development. As I have mentioned earlier, Eliot’s conceptions of childhood and psychology had a profound influence on psychiatrists and medical practitioners in the Victorian period and beyond. Leonard Guthrie, whose 1907 book *Functional Nervous Disorders in Childhood* was one of the first full-length child psychiatry studies, drew upon Eliot’s work to understand better the psychological complexity of childhood (Shuttleworth 16). From Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, he quotes her passage on the emotional life of the child: “Every one of those keen moments has left its trace and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrevocably with the [finer] texture of our youth and manhood; and so it comes [to pass] that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain” (Eliot qtd. in Shuttleworth 16). Shuttleworth writes that:

Guthrie draws on Eliot to suggest that it is not only happiness in later life which is determined by childhood experience but also mental health. Suffering in childhood is not only real but has a permanent impact on the psyche. *The Mill on the Floss* was clearly a formative work for Guthrie. (Shuttleworth 16)

Like Eliot, in his 1856 article ‘Hereditary Influence, Animal and Human,’ her partner G. H. Lewes sought to weaken notions that the origins of insanity were always hereditary and necessarily inherent. With Latimer, Eliot is thinking about the phenomenon of loss; its effects on the psyche; and, as I will later explore, its effects on the ability to sympathize and relate to others. *The Lifted Veil* shows the way in which Eliot might be thinking about complicated developmental questions, the nature/nurture problem that dominated the thinking at the time, and still does today. Eliot presents Latimer’s own accounting for his character with one that believes in his own innate qualities or ‘nature.’ For example, Latimer describes himself as possessing a particularly ‘sensitive’ nature various times throughout the text. His depressed state is very much an embodied one: “I saw in my face nothing but the stamp of a morbid organisation, framed for passive suffering” (Eliot, *Lifted* 14). In relation to others, Latimer also justifies his inability to relate to his constitution. About his bother Alfred, he writes that “There must always have been an antipathy between our two natures” (14) and with regards to his father, “the radical antipathy between our natures made my insight into his inner self a constant affliction to me” (27). It is important to identify this aspect of Latimer’s notion of himself and others because it is in great contrast to the way in which Eliot considers human growth and relatedness as dependent on individual agency and free will. In one example of her expressing these sentiments, in *Adam Bede* the narrator writes: “What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined-to strengthen each other ... to be at one with each other in silent, unspeakable memories” (Eliot, *Adam* 300). Latimer, on the other hand attributes his general inability to relate to people to “This disposition of mine,” which “was not favourable to the formation of intimate friendships among the numerous youths of my own age” (Eliot, *Lifted* 7).

### **Eliot’s Philosophy of Sympathy**

Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy is made richer through an analysis of how she conceives of melancholia as later articulated by Freud, the

## Chronology of George Eliot's Life\_\_\_\_\_

- 1819** November 22: Mary Anne Evans born at South Farm, Arbury, Warwickshire. November 29: Evans baptized at Chilvers Coton Church.
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- 1820** Family moves to Griff House, Chilvers Coton.
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- 1824** Evans attends Dame's School, then Miss Lathom's boarding school at Attleborough.
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- 1828** Evans attends Mrs. Wallington's school at Nuneaton, meets teacher Maria Lewis.
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- 1832** Evans attends the Miss Franklin's school in Coventry.
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- 1836** February 3: Evans' mother dies. Evans leaves school.
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- 1837** Evans becomes housekeeper to her father upon the marriage of her sister Chrissey. Changes her first name from Mary Anne to Mary Ann.
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- 1838** Evans visits London with her brother Isaac.
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- 1840** Evans' first publication, a poem, is published in the *Christian Observer*.
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- 1841** Evans and her father move to Bird Grove, Coventry. She meets Charles and Cara Bray at Rosehill in November.
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- 1842** January 2: Evans refuses to attend church with her father. They do not reconcile until she agrees to attend church again in May. She meets Sara Hennell in the summer.
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## Works by George Eliot

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### Novels

*Adam Bede* (1859)

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860)

*Silas Marner* (1861)

*Romola* (1863)

*Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866)

*Middlemarch* (1871–2)

*Daniel Deronda* (1876)

### Poetry

*The Spanish Gypsy* (1868)

*Brother and Sister* (1869)

*The Legend of Jubal* (1874)

### Other

Translation of *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, by David Strauss  
(1846)

Translation of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, by Ludwig Feuerbach  
(1854)

“Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856)

“The Natural History of German Life” (1856)

*Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857)

*The Lifted Veil* (1859)

*Brother Jacob* (1864)

*Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879)