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# A matter of character: Aristotelian ethos in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*

Danielle Jacobson  
*Iowa State University*

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A matter of character: Aristotelian ethos in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*

by

Danielle Jacobson

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Dometa Wiegand, Major Professor

Linda Shenk

Ben Crosby

Iowa State University

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## INTRODUCTION: A GREAT NOVELIST'S DISAPPOINTMENT

Henry James once observed that George Eliot would “remain the great novelist who has written the fewest short stories” (130). Given the success of those short stories and novellas she did publish, he is likely correct. Among the small collection of her shorter work, her 1859 novella, *The Lifted Veil*, was a great disappointment in comparison to her previous work. Eliot sought its publication only five months after the successful completion of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, and midway through the composition of *The Mill on the Floss* which was to become her most successful text (Oxford Companion 230). When John Blackwood received the manuscript for publication on May 18, 1855, he noted, “I wish the theme had been a happier one, and I think you must have been worrying and disturbing yourself about something when you wrote” (Haight 201). He went so far as to encourage Eliot to remove some of the supernatural content entirely, explaining, “I very much dislike the revivifying experiment at the end and would strongly advise its deletion. I cannot help thinking that some of our excellent scientific friends’ experiments on some confounded animalcule must have suggested it” (Haight 201). According to Beryl Gray’s *Afterward* in the Virago edition, Blackwood eventually persuaded Eliot to publish the text anonymously, as he thought “it would be imprudent... to risk tarnishing the valuable author’s prestige by associating it in the meantime with so unsuitable a production” (69). He clearly believed that the story would bring her little success but would instead damage her growing popularity.

Although this particular story was not considered successful by Blackwood or Eliot's contemporary critics, it remains Eliot's only story published in a first-person narrative. As such, *The Lifted Veil* invites special attention toward its unique descriptive voice. Eliot's narrator, Latimer, is a storyteller who, though limited by his first-person perspective, uses his supposed clairvoyance and reflective timeline to give himself an air of omniscience. Yet, though he may seem intuitive, several moments in the narrative call into question his credibility as an objective storyteller, as a more detailed analysis of the text will show. These moments primarily emerge through his retelling of his visionary skills and the deaths of those around him. A careful examination of the text through the lens of classic rhetorical theory suggests not only that Latimer is an unreliable and unjust narrator, but that his dishonesty may stem from a deeply-rooted sense of inferiority and emasculation resulting from intellectual and physical deficiencies as well as his inability to form substantial relationships with those around him.

An examination of Latimer's credibility is justified by a review of Eliot's personal and professional circumstances at the time of the story's publication. As Wayne Booth notes in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, "though the author can to some extent choose his disguise, he can never choose to disappear" (20). Here, Booth asserts that traces of an author can always be found in the text, even if they are disguised. It seems logical, then, that elements from Eliot's life would appear in *The Lifted Veil*, whether disguised or overt. Among her early works, the text emerged during one of the most demanding and challenging times in Eliot's career. Born Marian Evans, Eliot began her literary career at the ripe age of thirty-eight, composing seven novels, a dozen poems and handful of short stories and translations before her death at age sixty-one. Upon her 1854 elopement with

George Henry Lewes, Eliot lost much of her personal and professional credibility, as well as many close friendships. In regard to the public outcry at the affair, Ina Taylor writes, “The general attitude to the episode was one of disgust at the way Lewes had seduced that ‘strong-minded woman’ from the *Westminster Review*. News of the scandal spread round London with the virulence of cholera” (136). Joseph Parks even went so far as to classify the affair as a “concubinage” and labeling it a most “infamous seduction” (136). After the two returned from their excursions abroad, Eliot’s new enthusiasm for writing fiction and Lewes’s encouragement were met with animosity and ostracism from Eliot’s former friends. To avoid tying her scandalous personal life to her writing, when Eliot finally published her *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857, she did so under her pen name hiding her identity even from her publisher. In fact, Lewes opted for Blackwood’s in Edinburgh because of its distance from London. According to Taylor, he feared that “one of the London magazines might recognize Marian’s handwriting from her previous work. Also, within the claustrophobic world of London journalism, any hope of anonymity would be short lived” (156). It was not until *Adam Bede* was well underway that Eliot revealed her identity to John Blackwood, still requesting that he respect her privacy and publish her subsequent writing under the same pen name. Blackwood then wrote to his wife, confirming their long suspicions as to the Eliot identity, and noting, “This is to be kept a profound secret, and on all accounts it is desirable, as you will readily imagine” (Haight 436). Clearly, Eliot’s anonymity was of great importance as Blackwood believed her success would be greatly undermined if her personal indiscretions were directly connected with her writing.

This anonymity was threatened in June of 1857 when Eliot discovered in a letter from her sister, Fanny, that many readers of *Scenes* were attributing the text to Joseph Liggins. Eliot and Lewes were able to laugh off the comment until the publication of *Adam Bede* prompted additional debate and garnered more support for Liggins's authorship. As Taylor summarizes, "The persistence of the Joseph Liggins myth, however, irritated [Eliot], and when his supporters began collecting money because, they claimed, Blackwood's had fleeced him over *Adam Bede*, her irritation turned to agitation. Letters of denial were sent to the newspapers, but nothing short of exhibiting the real George Eliot would silence the claimant" (166). Eliot's anger was compounded by her inability to stop the rumors despite repeated attempts to do so. Her June 5<sup>th</sup> letter to the Editor of the *Times* in 1859 went so far as to categorize Liggins as "an imposter" and "a swindler" yet had no noticeable effect on the rapidly spreading rumors (Haight 92-93). At a loss for any other means of dissuading the pretentious Liggins, Lewes and Eliot opted to reveal the author's true identity. The move was first explained in a letter to Eliot's friend Barbara Bodichon on June 30, 1859. Though the text of the letter was written in Eliot's hand, its resolution was composed by Lewes. He, presumably writing on behalf of his mistress, explains:

Since the above was written we have come to the resolution of no longer concealing the authorship. It makes me angry to think that people should say that the secret has been kept because there was any *fear* of the effect of the author's name. You may tell it openly to all who care to hear it that the object of anonymity was to get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman. It is quite clear that people would

have sniffed at it if they had known the writer to be a woman but they can't now unsay their admiration. (Haight 106)

However, the pair need not have worried about how Eliot's readers would react to the new revelation. Lewes proved quite right in his assertion that her readers "can't now unsay their admiration." As Taylor notes, "Eliot's fame was so well established that it only suffered a minor dent by the revelation that the author was Lewes's mistress" (170). However, as many critics of *The Lifted Veil* have pointed out, Eliot wrote the text under the assumption that her credibility and success could be entirely undermined by associating her writing with her personal life.

Martin Willis, one such critic, joins critics like Gilbert and Gubar in suggesting that Eliot's concerns regarding her anonymity and autonomy as an author were driving forces behind her writing in the years following her "elopement" with George Henry Lewes. Willis points to public speculations regarding the authorship of *Adam Bede* and *Scenes of Clerical Life* as well as Eliot's subsequent fear of her exposure as evidence of this insecurity. Additionally, Eliot's correspondence with John Blackwood regarding the manuscript for *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that the editor desired more control over the style and content of the text than Eliot was prepared to relinquish. Willis argues:

Understandably sensitive to preconceptions about her moral character, Eliot accused John Blackwood of bowing to perceived public opprobrium. The discovery of the identity of George Eliot was acknowledged as turning the figure of the author into a personal figure of low morality. Authorship as a professional practice respected in Victorian culture is here substituted for female laxity.



Marian Evans was no longer George Eliot the writer but George Eliot the immoral woman. (201)

From this understanding of the cultural implications of revealing Eliot's true identity, Willis surmises that Eliot's chief concern in 1858 was in preserving her own credibility as an author, a struggle that is mirrored by Latimer's search for authority and recognition in his own narrative. Were the authorship of *Adam Bede* tied to her scandalous personal life, Eliot could expect a loss in both respect and readership. Willis joins in this expectation, musing, "How would the literary market react to the revelation that one of their most favoured writers was not only a woman but a woman whose morality allowed her to live openly with a married man?" (201). Eliot had no way of knowing, as readers now do, that her talent as a writer and strong support from both Lewes and Blackwood would help her recover from exposure and continue on to publish several more successful novels. The chronological significance of *The Lifted Veil* in Eliot's career as well as her tendency to incorporate biographical elements into her writing suggests that the questions over Eliot's credibility would manifest themselves in her narrator.

Through her writing, Eliot profoundly influenced the development of the novel, laying the groundwork for later novelists such as D.H. Lawrence and Henry James. As a result, many critics<sup>1</sup> have devoted their time and attention to her novels, praising her humorous style and incorporation of autobiographical elements. These same critics became fascinated with her most famous works like *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. Although *The Lifted Veil* emerged during a clearly tumultuous time in Eliot's career, very few critics have devoted their creative energy to the tale. Both Elliot Rubinstein and B.M. Gray have commented on this phenomenon noting that it is strange

that any story by such a thoroughly criticized author could escape considerable notice. Gray even went so far as to remark that the 1980 British Library exhibition failed to include *The Lifted Veil* among Eliot's other work (408). Gray further suggests that the story "seems to arouse embarrassment rather than interest, as if there were a general wish either that it had not been written at all or that it had been written by someone more appropriate—Poe, perhaps" (408). In this, Gray draws on Rubinstein's earlier suggestion that the story seems "much more likely to belong with the likes of *Notes from the Underground* than with *Middlemarch*" (177). The paranormal elements, though fascinating, were unexpected from Eliot as her past writing drew so much from real life experiences.

*The Lifted Veil*'s distinction among Eliot's other works seems to have inspired neglect rather than attention. In fact, Rubinstein's comments written in the early nineteen-sixties marked the beginning of any sort of critical look at the text, though her brief article focused more on the absence of criticism than on producing much of her own meaningful dialogue on the subject. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's revival of criticism in their widely canonized 1979 text drew from more of Eliot's biographical context, though their comparison between Eliot's story and Shelley's *Frankenstein* focused primarily on issues of gender. *The Madwoman in the Attic* drew *The Lifted Veil* into the spotlight of feminist theory, paving the way for the rush of criticism that emerged in the following decades. Thus, it is understandable that much of the criticism involving Eliot's narrative focuses primarily on issues of gender. However, an examination of *The Lifted Veil* in light of the gender issues plaguing Eliot as a female author is only partially complete.

Terry Eagleton expands this field of criticism by moving from a feminist focus to a psychological analysis of Latimer's desire for control. He suggests that Latimer's quest is to obtain power over those around him, namely his wife, Bertha. By using his clairvoyant tendencies as a means of control, Latimer is able to revise his history and, by association, those characters included in it. Eagleton questions Latimer's telepathic abilities, as very few critics have, suggesting that Latimer's desire to defame and discredit his wife leads him to construct unreliable narratives. As he points out:

Latimer has rigged his tale to frame his wife, impudently concocting an event as he may have previously, perhaps more permissibly, falsified perceptions. This, of course, is a wholly impermissible conclusion, unverifiable and unacceptable within realist hypotheses, and yet, knowing Latimer, who would put it past him?  
(60)

Here, Eagleton briefly touches on the notion of Latimer's possible deception; however, his analysis is also incomplete in that it too, fails to connect Latimer's struggle for authority to Eliot's desire for autonomy and control over her own writing.

Though Eagleton's argument draws closer to the question of Latimer's credibility, the most blatant doubts in this regard emerge from Jill Galvan's article, "The Narrator as Medium in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*." Though her primary focus is on the telepathic modes in the narrative, she does spend a very brief period of time assessing Latimer's credibility as a narrator, noting that the reader has "much reason to question the real existence of Latimer's occult abilities and hence his reliability" (242). She argues that his "capacities, goals, and effects in that position" cloud his objectivity as a narrator rendering his account unreliable (240). Her subtle observation that, for all his pretense of

prevision, Latimer is “actually narrating after the fact” (244) illuminates a very distinct flaw in his credibility. The chronology of the narrative offers Latimer the ability to rewrite history. He knows what the future will hold because he has already lived through it. In that sense, his clairvoyant episodes might be nothing more than misrepresentations of what really happened. Unfortunately, Galvan moves quickly from this strain dismissing it by noting, “The case for Latimer’s unreliability can be elaborated in detail, but a few observations must suffice to illustrate it here” (243). Like Eagleton, her lack of support weakens her argument as does her failure to incorporate historical facts about Eliot into the argument.

Galvan and Eagleton, then, begin a dialogue which draws into question Latimer’s credibility as a narrator. Though both authors spend little time on the subject, the text of the story offers plenty of support to further these claims. And, by Galvan’s admission, there is much more to be said on the matter than she was able to unpack in her short article. She herself points to the topic’s importance, warning, “Latimer’s narration—exceptionally palpable as a relay to a reader, but perverting that relay because unreliable—emblemizes in the realm of literature the intricacies and even treacheries at risk for a culture entrusting its messages more and more to human media” (246). Galvan, then, suggests that the way a reader understands Latimer can have an impact on the way he or she reads and absorbs all literature, and that it is his unreliability that arouses concern for the literate culture at large. Thomas Albrecht picks up this thread, elaborating on the cultural utility of such an examination. He suggests that Eliot herself intends readers to view her characters as instructive as well as entertaining: “Eliot proposes that our insights into the minds and experiences of these characters ‘extend’ our sympathy for

other people and for humanity in general, thereby producing an ethical response in us” (437-38). Furthermore, Albrecht connects Eliot’s own story to the discussion, suggesting that Latimer’s clairvoyance can be used as a way of viewing Eliot herself. He argues that, in this respect, Latimer is “stand-in for the reader or viewer, and also, in another sense, a stand-in for Eliot herself and for the artist in general” (439). So far, some strands of criticism have laid a simple foundation for an argument that examines Latimer’s credibility and motivation and others have attempted to connect the story to the life of George Eliot. However, no critic has fully examined Latimer’s credibility as a way to view Eliot’s professional struggles with authority and control. This oversight may overlook elements of the text which could expand the reader’s understanding of Eliot’s professional life as well as its influence over her writing. Many critics have struggled with the problematic spiritual elements of the text, especially the final blood transfusion scene. However, by looking at the text through the lens of ethos, it may be possible to piece together how Eliot’s life relates to Latimer’s narrative and how the interplay of the two influences a critical reading of the text. Thus, the troublesome elements in the story may seem less so when reread with regards to credibility.

As Willis’s criticism has already pointed out, the writing of *The Lifted Veil* coincided with an enormously challenging time in Eliot’s life. Her incorporation of her acquaintances into her *Scenes of Clerical Life* as well as her other novels was acknowledged to be one of her strengths. Taylor points out that Eliot got her first inspiration from those friends and neighbors who used to visit her father. She observes that Eliot “enjoyed herself hugely, sending up various people she had disliked in her youth, from snobbish neighbours to pompous bankers who had visited her father” (156).

As Eliot was so adept at incorporating her firsthand experiences into her writing, it stands to reason that she would have done the same with this shorter work, particularly as she was experiencing issues of credibility in her own life similar to those faced by Latimer. By examining the text in light of a classical understanding of credibility, it may be possible to establish a connection between Latimer's credibility and the narrative itself as well as explain its impact on the reader's view of Eliot's personal and professional goals. It seems clear that Latimer's story and his relationships with his family and friends are tied to George Eliot's concerns in her own life. By looking at Latimer's credibility, a strong case can be made for Eliot's concern for her own credibility as an author were her affair with George Henry Lewes tied to her writing. Also, Latimer's representation of Bertha can be tied to Eliot's thoughts on the importance of her own sexual "misconduct" in her professional life as well as the problems associated with being a "voiceless" woman in a professional field dominated by men.

For this classical understanding of credibility, it seems fitting to reference Aristotle as a foremost authority on the subject as his notion of ethos is text-centered. His understanding, unlike today's more modern interpretation, suggests that a speaker's ethos emerges from the speech itself. As James Jasinski suggests, "Aristotle was concerned in identifying the 'art' of rhetoric. Elements of character not in the speech are *inartistic* and, consequently, not of interest for someone describing the constituents of an art" (229). As such, Aristotle's explanation is particularly helpful in textual analysis as it forces readers to return to Eliot's text to examine Latimer's credibility. This ancient notion of ethos is also helpful since the reader's exposure to Latimer's character emerges solely from the text. As a fictional character, there is no other source to incorporate into an analysis, so it

seems fitting to employ the tools of a philosopher who specifically addresses his notion of ethos to the uncovering of textual support. Some may argue that the use of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in such a way is anachronistic as his text was primarily concerned with oral tradition as well as civic and political usefulness in Athens, not necessarily its theoretical impact in later writing. Though that argument does have some merit, it overlooks one key point: just because something was intended for use in one medium of communication does not necessarily limit its relevance to that specific genre, particularly when considering something as pervasive as credibility. Ethos, whether or not directly addressed as such, emerges constantly in everyday life. Consumers are drawn to foods in the grocery store by brands they trust, movie-goers attend films starring actors and actresses they know to be talented, patients seek out physicians based on their credentials, faculty members even assign books by canonized authors like George Eliot based on the author's reputation. The current cultural climate predisposes individuals to look at credibility first when making snap judgments about a thousand everyday decisions. Ethos, then, is relevant when looking at Eliot's text just as it is in those circumstances and perhaps even more so when considering the questions Eliot faced regarding her own credibility. If the reader is already inclined to examine Latimer's credibility, a complete and thorough understanding of the concept is not only responsible and beneficial, but necessary.

By using the Aristotelian concept of ethos as a lens through which to view Latimer's narrative, it should become clear that the character's unreliability as a narrator may stem from a flawed personal character and a lack of the three essential characteristics as described in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: sense, excellence and goodwill. From

there, an examination of the text of the story will show that Latimer may have been motivated to deceive his readers by feelings of abandonment, inadequacy and isolation. Armed with this knowledge, readers can then evaluate the accuracy of the story itself and perhaps offer a rereading of Eliot's text in light of Latimer's credibility. Furthermore, this reexamination and rereading will serve to advance the reader's understanding of Eliot's work as well as the impact her personal and professional lives may have had on this story.



## CHAPTER ONE: SENSE, EXCELLENCE AND GOODWILL

To begin an analysis of Latimer's credibility using Aristotelian ethos, it is first important to understand Aristotle's writing on the subject. The philosopher believed rhetoric should always serve a clear purpose. As William Benoit summarizes, Aristotelian rhetoric should fulfill one of three functions. First, it should be used as an instructive tool. If instruction is impossible due to internal or external forces, rhetoric should be used to persuade. Second, rhetoric can be used to refute unfair arguments in order to expose injustices. Finally, rhetoric can be used to defend the rhetor from charges or allegations (254). In this sense, Aristotle saw that rhetoric could be either civic or self-serving. Rhetors could seek to instruct others to make fair decisions and powerful rebuttals in the public sphere, or they could seek to persuade their audiences to avoid unfairness and wrongful judgments against themselves or others. By his own admission, Latimer's narrative falls into this second category. In the opening paragraphs of his account, he offers an explanation of the text's existence stating, "I wish to use my last hours of ease and strength in telling the strange story of my experience... we have all a chance of meeting with some pity, some tenderness, some charity, when we are dead" (987). His stated purpose is to endear himself to his readers after his death in a way that he was never able to do while living. He continues to drive this point home suggesting, "It is only the story of my life that I will perhaps win a little more sympathy from strangers when I am dead, than I ever believed it would obtain from my friends while I was living" (987). This statement illuminates Latimer's lack of close personal relationships. Presumably, any substantial friendships would foster some element of

mutual sympathy. The fact that Latimer's "friends" are not disposed to offer any is suspicious. Latimer's rhetoric, then, is a selfish one, seeking only to elicit sympathy where in the past he has found none. However, in order for Latimer to be successful in this attempt, he must master what Aristotle explains as the three appeals or proofs of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos.

On this subject, Aristotle writes, "Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself" (2155). It is important to understand that Aristotle meant these three proofs to be used in conjunction with one another. A rhetor that is not in command of all three appeals will not be successful in his or her persuasive pursuits. The use of one independent of the others, while helpful, will not be entirely persuasive. Practically, then, were George Eliot herself to be adept at persuading her audience through emotion and appeals to logic, she would still fall short of Aristotle's benchmark for effective rhetoric were she incapable of drawing from her own credibility. These three appeals are important in the sense that when combined they offer a holistic approach to communication.

Mary Nichols further explains the importance of these proofs, noting that they are "most essential to rhetoric" (663). She offers an alternative translation of the Greek word *pisteis*, often transposed as "proof" or "mode" in the above passage, suggesting that Aristotle meant this much more broadly. By her estimation, a more complete understanding would require us to translate *pisteis* as a "reason or cause of belief" (663). In this sense, all three elements can encourage confidence and action. Aristotle, however,

boldly characterizes ethos as the most persuasive proof, noting that a speaker's character might be "the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (2155). Nichols offers her own explanation for its importance, suggesting that absent of any other proof of a rhetor's honesty an audience will naturally examine a speaker's character to judge the quality of his or her rhetoric. As she explains, "unable to follow difficult chains of reasoning or to weigh the complex considerations involved, men might judge an argument primarily on the basis of their judgment of the man who makes it" (670). This explains why, even though Latimer is skilled at playing on the emotionality and "sympathy" of his readers and using his clairvoyance as a logical explanation of his idiosyncrasies, his lack of ethos limits his success and renders his narrative ineffective. In this sense, his credibility is a cause for disbelief rather than trust. It also explains Eliot's hesitation to connect her writing to her personal life, believing that her readers would judge the text not on its own merit but rather based on her reputation as an immoral woman.

As Eliot's forced anonymity shows, ethos is above all a matter of character. Were she viewed as a moral woman rather than a fallen woman of questionable character, it may not have been so dangerous to connect Marian Evans with *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. As Aristotle explains, "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided" (2155). Here, as William Fortenbaugh explains, Aristotle attempted to protect his audience from the unethical rhetor that may attempt to use emotional appeals and

false logic to confuse and distort the issues. By looking at character first and foremost, the audience can evaluate the rhetor (and, by extension, the rhetoric) without bias.

Fortenbaugh notes that Aristotle developed “a notion of persuasion through character that [did] not aim at working an emotional effect. It [aimed] at giving the unemotional and impartial auditor good reason for paying attention and possibly deciding in favor of the speaker” (228). It is primarily for this reason that Aristotle characterizes ethos as the most persuasive proof. By these statements, it is clear that Aristotle felt personal character to be of high importance when crafting arguments (or testimonies), and that he felt certain its importance only increased when the subject of the argument was divisive and controversial or could potentially overwhelm the audience through appeals to emotion or false logic. Unfortunately, for Eliot these protections limited her promise as an author as many Victorian readers seemed to accept the Aristotelian connection between character and competence. As is clear in the remaining Eliot letters, as well as the biographical context, her readers would not have read her books so enthusiastically or praised them so thoroughly if a woman of questionable character was known to be the author.

This same question of character can certainly be applied to Latimer’s narrative. For one, Latimer’s credibility becomes more important due to the controversial nature of the paranormal elements of his tale. As Jill Galvan notes, the Victorian era was highly skeptical of “alleged clairvoyant prophesies,” preferring instead to seek out logical explanations (243). An audience that is already suspicious of clairvoyant phenomena will be more so when evidence of its existence comes from an unreliable source. Additionally, as this is a first-person narrative, Latimer’s credibility is directly tied to the truthfulness of the story he is telling. If he is not a credible source, readers do not have the benefit of

seeking out a second or third narrative to sort out fact from fiction. They must rely instead on what they find in the text itself. As Aristotle explains, persuasion “should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak.” (2155). Thus, the truth must be uncovered in the story itself, whether narrated unfairly or not. As Nichols asserts, “Although a man can hide the reasons that he is giving a particular speech, as popular opinion feared, in a broader sense he will be revealed by the kind of speech he makes” (665). By the same logic, then, Latimer’s motivations and credibility can be revealed by the kind of story he tells. Finally, through his own admission, Latimer’s purpose in this story is to draw out his audience’s sympathy and understanding. Since his stated intent is to play on his readers’ emotions, it is essential for the audience to be armed with tools that will help evaluate his credibility without being swept up in the more heartbreaking elements of his tale. To do this, then, readers need to look for elements in Latimer’s character that would indicate whether or not he is credible. Fortenbaugh supports the notion of exploring character noting, “In other words, being worthy of belief implies having certain attributes which normally affect listeners in a certain way—namely, they are inclined to believe the speaker because he is, or at least appears to be, the sort of person who does not make false statements” (226). The first burden, then, rests in deciphering whether or not Latimer is the type of person to tell a true story. For this, it is important to return both to Aristotle’s work as well as Eliot’s text.

Aristotle not only explains the importance of personal character but also offers a specific way of evaluating it. He summarizes the character of what he classified as “men in their prime,” noting:

They have neither that excess of confidence which amounts to rashness, nor too much timidity, but the right amount of each. They neither trust everybody nor distrust everybody, but judge people correctly. Their lives will be guided not by the sole consideration either of what is noble or of what is useful, but by both; neither by parsimony nor by prodigality, but by what is fit and proper. So, too, in regard to anger and desire; they will be brave as well as temperate, and temperate as well as brave... To put it generally, all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness. (2215)

In Aristotle's estimation, a middle-aged man such as Latimer should encompass the positive traits of both youth and old age. The key to a strong personal character at this life stage is balance: neither angry nor full of desire, neither lavish nor skimping. Aristotle further describes a strong personal character as the embodiment of sense, excellence and goodwill, noting that these are the three things "which inspire confidence in the orator's own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it" (2194). Unfortunately, Aristotle does not give much by way of an explanation of these characteristics within his *Rhetoric*. For that, it is important to turn instead to Aristotle's other writings as well as some modern interpretations of his work before measuring Latimer's aptitude in these areas.

In the context of rhetorical ethos this first characteristic, sense, is perhaps better translated as wisdom or *phronesis*. Understanding this concept requires a first look at what Aristotle has written on the subject in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to him, wisdom is the "most finished of the forms of knowledge" (1801). In this sense, wisdom is

something to be earned over time through an extended process of self-improvement. Broken down into parts, wisdom is the combination of knowledge and comprehension (1801). Aristotle's description of wisdom in *Nichomachean Ethics*, then, is not so very different from a modern understanding. It is simply the merging of information and critical thinking. Michael Halloran expands on Aristotle's second characteristic, excellence, explaining that it is, in a sense, "a matter of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps" (61). He believes that Aristotle's intention in naming excellence as a key component of personal character was to highlight the level of virtue present in the rhetor. A person becomes virtuous, according to Halloran, by doing that which is virtuous. Here, he references another passage from *Nichomachean Ethics* which states, "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1743). Excellence, according to Aristotle's text, can be categorized in terms of intellectual and moral excellence. The first emerges through intense study and learning, while the second is obtained through the type of virtuous action explained through Halloran's analysis. Fortenbaugh expands on Aristotle's third criterion, his notion of goodwill, explaining that in order to be effective a rhetor "must first prove their intentions by presenting themselves as friends of the city, as persons full of goodwill to the democratic majority" (223). Essentially, then, the speaker needs to establish a sense of trust with his audience built on their mutual desire to accomplish the greater good. In this sense, goodwill is a selfless quality, requiring the rhetor to remove his own goals from the argument and instead focus on what is best for everyone involved. By Aristotle's estimation, then, a person's ethos is dependent entirely on his or her personal character. A man or woman of

character is someone possessing sense, excellence and goodwill, as well as a balance of characteristics deemed “fitting and proper.”

Here, then, it is possible to return to Eliot’s narrator to measure his character using the parameters given by Aristotle. As Galvan notes, few people have attempted to analyze Latimer’s credibility, though many critics have sharply listed the imperfections of his character. She posits, “If few, nevertheless, have wanted to pursue in earnest the premise of factual flaws in Latimer’s narration, many have been quick to note his moral flaws” (244). From this as well as the overview of the story’s critical reception in the early pages of this argument, it is clear that *The Lifted Veil* was not a popular story, and its poor reception could be partially attributed to Latimer’s lack of ethical authority. He is not likeable because he is not ethical. His character is flawed in respect to Aristotle’s list of necessary components. As the story itself proves, he is not wise, he displays no excellence and he does not seek the greater good.

In regard to wisdom, Latimer tells his audience that his academic pursuits were very different than most young men. His physical condition limited his educational opportunities so much so that he received less special attention than his older brother, Alfred. As Latimer explains, his father chose to educate his younger son “on a different plan from the prescriptive one with which he had complied in the case of [his] elder brother, already a tall youth at Eton” (988). Instead, Latimer was put under the charge of private tutors, though he did not gain much in the way of education from their assistance. He remarks, “A better-constituted boy would certainly have profited under my intelligent tutors... As it was, I could have paired off, for ignorance of whatever was taught me, with the worst Latin scholar that was ever turned out of a classical academy” (989).



Latimer attempts to make up for this lack of knowledge by explaining his supernatural ability to read the thoughts of those around him and catch glimpses of the future, but it should be noted that his lack of academic enthusiasm emerged long before his supposed clairvoyance. Latimer's lack of wisdom is intensified by his lack of motivation. Terry Eagleton associates the narrator's lack of motivation with his supposed clairvoyance arguing, "Total omniscience keels over inexorably into solipsism. In a curious sense, if you knew everything you would know nothing, because subjectivity would inflate to such immense proportions that it would overwhelm and cancel its object, leaving nothing outside itself to know" (54). Eagleton, very suspicious of Latimer's abilities, seems to suggest here that even if the character were the clairvoyant that he presents himself to be, he would still be neither wise nor knowledgeable by traditional standards. Instead, his subjectivity would undermine any knowledge obtained through his supposed omniscience.

Latimer's lack of wisdom is joined by a lack of excellence. In light of Aristotle's explanation of the term, it is possible to characterize excellence as initiative, hard work and action. Latimer, however, does not possess these traits to any measurable level. In the opening paragraphs of his testimony, he bemoans, "I shall leave no works behind me for men to honor" (987). By his own admission, Latimer is not a man of action. In fact, his fondest memories of childhood emerge from a period of blindness during which his mother was responsible for meeting all of his needs. He explains these circumstances noting that his mother had kept him "on her knee from morning till night" (988). He enjoyed the attentions of his mother because they required none of his own initiative. As he grew older, this trend continued under the care of his private tutors. Latimer

remembers one who would assure him that “an improved man, as distinguished from an ignorant one, was a man who knew the reason why water ran downhill,” yet Latimer immediately states that he had “no desire to be this improved man” (989).

In addition to Latimer’s academic shortcomings, Joy Johnson argues that Latimer possesses many characteristics traits that traditionally belong to female characters. She points out that, rather than a strong male character:

he is more like a gothic heroine, suffering from a sense of imprisonment, passivity, and a sickly body... Suffering from angina pectoris, a heart condition which can cause its sufferers to feel suffocated or strangled in the chest-region, he refers to his passivity as the victim of the abilities from which he comes to endure... not seeking a separation from Bertha, to whom he has bound himself by marriage, despite his hellish prevision of her. (3)

Here, Johnson argues that Latimer uses his physical condition as an excuse for his inaction, or “passivity,” even going so far as to fail to take steps to avoid a relationship with a woman who, according to his “previsions,” despises him. Furthermore, Latimer finds little enjoyment in subjects requiring active attention or study like science (989) and pastimes like hunting (1002), but rather prefers the relaxing, lethargic practice of admiring nature’s aesthetic beauty (989). His final comment on the subject is the most telling of all: “I have said enough to indicate that my nature was of the sensitive, unpractical order” (989). His lack of initiative, hard work and action make it difficult to classify Latimer as a man of excellence.

Finally, Latimer’s narrative is motivated out of selfishness. He harbors no goodwill toward his audience. As has already been stated, his primary purpose through

the text is to inspire sympathy and compassion in his audience members. He does not acknowledge any other good that may result from his tale, nor does he allow for the potential damage unveiling himself may have on those included in the story. This act of selfishness is a continuation of similar acts perpetuated throughout his life. As Thomas Albrecht points out, “while Latimer has access to the thoughts and feelings of others, he does not respond according to Eliot’s prescription; he feels neither sympathy nor affection. Rather than eliciting pity and compassion, Latimer’s telepathic insights elicit in him only boredom and contempt” (439). Even when face to face with the feelings of those around him, Latimer is incapable of experiencing empathy or remorse for his own actions. He desires the very best from himself, not the greater good for everyone else. In this sense, then, Latimer is entirely without the element of goodwill that Aristotle requires from credible speakers.

Clearly, Latimer lacks each of the traits necessary to embody Aristotelian ethos. Michael Halloran summarizes this notion of ethos explaining, “In its simplest form, *ethos* is what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe” (60). As Aristotle’s criteria have shown, Latimer is not the sort of person that can be believed: he is not a man of character, lacking sense, excellence and goodwill. His word, therefore, may not be trusted. He may not be a credible narrator by Aristotle’s standards.

When ethos is in question, as it is with an unreliable narrator like Latimer, it can be tempting to see the whole narrative as a fabrication based solely on the author’s lack of credibility. That, however, may be premature. As Mary Nichols reminds readers, “Aristotle means that the rhetorician might reveal his good character—his prudence, and

virtue, and good will—through his speech. And his character might be what persuades his audience to accept his point. Character is thus ‘a reason for belief’; in this sense it ‘proves’ the truth of the rhetorician’s position” (663). It is important to note that Nichols’s use of the word “might” is not absolute, but rather makes allowances for situations where character might *not* affect the truthfulness of a narrative. Knowing that Latimer is not a credible source simply encourages readers to take a closer look at the text itself in order to examine what truthfulness, if any, remains. For this purpose, it is necessary to examine what motivations may have encouraged Latimer to misrepresent the facts of his narrative as well as what he might achieve through his deception, something that the following chapters will explore in greater depth.

## CHAPTER TWO: AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR'S SHORTCOMINGS

As Latimer is not moved by a sense of goodwill supported by his own excellence and wisdom, it is important to seek out his motivation in order to judge the authenticity of his narrative. Were he a credible narrator, there would be little need to call into question the accuracy of his statements, but, as he is not reliable, the burden lies with readers to sift through the story itself to sort out fact from fiction. The most effective means to do so will be to examine Latimer's character for any identifiable traits that could have shifted his perspective or motivated any dishonesty. To do this will require focus on Latimer's three familial relations: his father, brother and wife. This will be a chronological undertaking, outlining the feelings of abandonment Latimer suffered as a child, moving on toward his youthful feelings of inferiority toward Alfred, and finishing with his unrequited love for Bertha. This methodical approach examines every one of Latimer's significant relationships that should yield an accurate depiction of his emotional state at the time of his narrative. Additionally, each of these close relationships highlights Latimer's deficiency in sense, excellence and goodwill.

George Eliot provides a wealth of detail regarding Latimer's childhood. As Elliot Rubenstein observes, "Eliot describes Latimer's childhood with the attention of a modern psychiatric worker preparing a case history" (178). Rubenstein further likens the "scientific care with which [Eliot] traces Latimer's early years" to similarly detailed childhood accounts for characters in her longer novels (177). From this stylistic connection it seems clear that the correlation between Latimer's childhood and his character and motivation in later life is no less significant in *The Lifted Veil* than Maggie

Tulliver's adolescent relationship with her brother Tom was in motivating her actions in *The Mill on the Floss*. With that in mind, the reader can begin to sift through Latimer's observations of his childhood in the hopes that they will offer clues into his later motivation.

Latimer's first diagnosis of his childhood suggests that it "perhaps seems happier... than it really was, by contrast with all the after-years" (987). From this, it seems clear that his memories have now become clouded by his later experiences, something which could lead him to misrepresent the truth of his narrative. Since, by his own admission, the happiness of his childhood clouds his interpretation of adulthood, it seems probable that the accuracy of his narrative could be affected by similar feelings. Latimer speaks of the memories he has of his "tender" mother's care, remembering fondly a childhood illness that rendered him blind: "she kept me on her knee from morning till night" (988). Just as the happiness of his childhood is contrasted by the melancholy of his later years, the love of his mother is contrasted by the indifference of his father. Latimer, who has professed to love his mother better than any other human being, explains the limited affection his father felt towards him, noting that his father thought him an "odd child" and had "little fondness" for him (988). From an early age, his father distinguishes between the dispositions of his two sons, something that stems from Latimer's tendency to appear "more timid and sensitive in his [father's] presence than at other times" (988).

Here, Rubenstein observes that, "Latimer in *The Lifted Veil* is an even more extreme instance of what happens to those deprived in early years of intelligent sympathy and of an encompassing society" (178). Her later observations indicate that Latimer's

“abnormal childhood” results in an “inability to enjoy human relations” throughout his adulthood (178). Thomas Albrecht draws a similar conclusion, noting that the use of telepathy in this story is Eliot’s attempt to further indicate Latimer’s isolation from normal relationships. He points out that, “Etymologically, the word telepathy implies distance (*tele*) and apartness; literally, it means to feel something from a distance. Telepathy is usually defined as extrasensory impressions of something or someone far away and separate from oneself. Thus it designates an appreciation of the other from a distance, a relation to the other that is absolutely unmediated by one’s senses or language” (451). In this sense, Latimer’s “telepathic” episodes could simply be a manifestation of the separateness he already feels, an “apartness” which leads to what Joy Johnson later classifies as Latimer’s attempt to “insinuate himself into readers’ minds” (5). It is probable that these feelings of separateness contribute largely to Latimer’s inability to manifest feelings of goodwill toward his audience, further solidifying his lack of credibility. Additionally, this apartness enhances Latimer’s early feelings of paternal abandonment and leads to later feelings of holistic abandonment. He feels as though he is apart from those around him, neither belonging to them nor wishing for them to belong to him. In this sense, the abandonment of his father leads Latimer to feel abandoned by everyone else. From the textual evidence Latimer provides for his readers, what emerges from his childhood most clearly is a strong feeling of loneliness.

This loneliness is amplified by Latimer’s constant comparisons between himself and his older brother, Alfred. The reader is first introduced to this brother indirectly, and even his parentage is left slightly nebulous. Latimer reminds readers that his father’s relationship with his mother was the result of a second marriage: “I was not [my father’s]

only son. My mother had been his second wife, and he was five-and-forty when he married her” (988). Though not expressly stated, the way Eliot frames this characterization of the older son suggests that he is the result of his father’s first marriage, and therefore shares no maternal connection with Latimer. A seemingly insignificant detail becomes especially important when coupled with Latimer’s strong affection toward his mother and sense of loss following her death. He does not seem to fully recover from that loss, though his external behaviors show little change. As he observes, “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 me when I came back” (988). Without that maternal link, the only happy part of his childhood, Latimer feels little connection between himself and his older brother. This detachment is further solidified by the significant physical and intellectual differences between the two brothers.

Latimer’s relationship with his brother is strained even more because the narrator exhibits strong feminine tendencies that embarrass and humiliate him, when contrasted with the hyper-masculinity he observes in his father and brother. Latimer’s relationship with his brother highlights his own perceived physical and emotional deficiencies, giving the audience further proof of his lack of evidence as well as his lack of credibility. Latimer self-professes to have been a “shy, sensitive boy” that was “not fit to encounter the rough experience of a public school” (988), though he attributes this last characterization as one of Mr. Letherall’s observations. Latimer also notes that he was “very stupid about machines,” but rather was “hungry for human deeds and human emotions,” confirming his father’s assumption that he had “no desire to be this improved



*man*” (989), [emphasis added]. He finds little enjoyment in traditionally masculine subjects like science (989) and pastimes like hunting (1002), but rather prefers the aesthetic beauty found in nature (989). He does not form relationships with other men easily and speaks only of one friend from school, a Charles Meuner, with whom he spends many enjoyable afternoons observing nature and listening “dreamily to the monologues in which [Charles] unfolded his bold conceptions of future experiment and discovery” (990). This feminization of the male narrator is something Galvan draws on, noting that even Latimer’s “gift” as a medium exhibits additional womanly qualities and that “Latimer’s ‘morbidly sensitive nature,’ his ‘fragile, nervous, ineffectual self,’ and his ‘half-womanish, half-ghostly beauty’ connote the séance medium’s particular milieu of feminine attributes” (241). Here, Eliot seems to use Latimer’s “clairvoyant” episodes to reaffirm his femininity and remind readers of the psychological differences between the narrator and his more traditionally masculine relatives.

All told, Latimer’s emotional distinction as a feminized depiction of masculinity serves only to compound his more debilitating physical infirmity. Though the reader is never told specifically what his illness is, the opening lines of his confession suggest that he is suffering from “attacks of *angina pectoris*” which Gilbert and Gubar identify as a “painful heart disease” (986). This disease, while physically crippling, may also have some metaphorical significance. The alienation of affection he experienced at a young age may have permanently affected Latimer’s ability to foster goodwill with those around him. In this sense, his heart is damaged spiritually as well as physically. In addition to this condition, Latimer also references his temporary blindness as a child, though this depiction suggests that it was a fleeting affliction unlikely to cause any permanent

disability. What the reader does know of his condition is that it is one prone to spells of exhaustion (993), fainting (994), and hysteria (1003), all things frequently associated with Victorian women. These characterizations were supported by medical experts like Thomas Laycock who testified as to women's physical inferiority, noting that "woman is but an imperfectly developed male" (Matus 28). As such, similar depictions of women's frailty are common in Victorian fiction.

As evidence of the connection between these physical ailments and gender, Eliot provides her own narration on the traditional Victorian heroine in the lament, *Silly Novels by Silly Lady Novelists*. In this text, Eliot attacks the over-inflated depictions of female characters, arguing that, "we have the satisfaction of knowing that her sorrows are wept into embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, that her fainting from reclines on the very best upholstery, and that whatever vicissitudes she may undergo, from being dashed out of her carriage to having her head shaved in a fever, she comes out of them all with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever" (979). From this, it can be assumed that Eliot understood physical infirmities such as fainting or exhaustion to be associated with not only female characters, but with badly-written ones. By this estimation, were Latimer to be a female character, in Eliot's estimation he would not be an excellent one, which further damages his credibility. In fact, Eliot even incorporated such stereotypical infirmities into her own heroines, most notably the great Maggie Tulliver who is described as being "really faint," "trembling with fear," and plagued with "weariness and exhaustion," in the midst of her tryst with Phillip Wakem (411). The combination of Eliot's own views on Victorian heroines with the incorporation of these

physical ailments in her own writing confirms that she would have expected her readers to associate these infirmities with poorly written feminine characters.

Latimer's lack of traditionally masculine physicality leads him to both admire and fear not just his father and brother but everything that reminds him of his own insecurities. Midway through the account of his youth, Latimer describes an encounter with the local military regiment, noting, "The measured tramp of soldiery which I sometimes heard—for my father's house lay near a country town where there were large barracks—made me sob and tremble; and yet when they were gone past, I longed for them to come back again" (988). His disassociation with such a masculine image brings into sharp relief his own physical shortcomings, yet he cannot reconcile his feelings of admiration with his feelings of inadequacy. These competing emotions continue to manifest themselves, ultimately leading to a sense of physical and intellectual weakness and offering further proof of his lack of excellence.

Latimer's feelings of inferiority are most noticeable in relation to his male relationships, particularly with his father and brother. Eliot's narrator professes to be "in great awe" of his father's "firm, unbending" intensity (988) and suggests that his father has little use of him, believing that Latimer "will never be good for anything in life," that he will "waste his years in an insignificant way" (1002). His father shows clear preference for Alfred and his traditionally masculine characteristics, something that Latimer greatly resents. He continually contrasts his own meek stature with his brother's height and strength. Whereas Alfred was well-educated, "broad-chested" (1002), "handsome," "self-confident;" Latimer had a "half-womanish, half-ghostly beauty" (994).

The resentment built up by this constant comparison surfaces most poignantly in terms of Alfred's relationship with Bertha. Nearly ten pages of the story have progressed before the name of Latimer's older brother is first mentioned. This initial reference comes from their father who suggests that, "there is tenderness between [Bertha] and Alfred" (994). By neglecting to fully identify his brother until he is associated with Bertha's affection, Latimer betrays his own inability to separate Alfred's masculinity from his identity in relation to Bertha. This failure leads to a jealous possessiveness of Bertha's affection and a competitiveness that is not reciprocated by his brother. Alfred, who sees Latimer as both weak and feeble, recognizes no rivalry between the two of them. This angers Latimer who resents his brother's kindness:

[Alfred] had the superficial kindness of a good-humored, self-satisfied nature that fears no rivalry, and has encountered no contrarities. I am not sure that my disposition was good enough for me to have been quite free from envy towards him, even if our desires had not clashed, and if I had been in the healthy human condition which admits of generous confidence and charitable construction. There must always have been an antipathy between our natures. As it was, he became in a few weeks an object of intense hatred to me; and when he entered the room, still more when he spoke, it was as if a sensation of grating metal had set my teeth on edge. (995)

Here, Latimer exposes both his envy and his hatred toward his brother. The two men have nothing in common, sharing neither dispositions nor desires, other than their mutual passion for Bertha, and Latimer feels no fraternal connection to him. In fact, Latimer projects his own emotions on to his brother's actions, labeling Alfred's kindness as the

“superficial” behavior of one who does not feel threatened by competition. More than anything, Latimer resents his brother’s speech, indicating that he would prefer Alfred to remain silent altogether. In effect, Latimer is successful at silencing his brother. Alfred, after all, is long dead when his younger brother crafts this narrative and is therefore unable to refute any misrepresentation in Latimer’s first-person account. In this sense, Latimer constructs a scenario in which his credibility is enhanced by a lack of refutation. He has removed all other dissenting voices from his narrative, which limits his reader’s ability to objectively judge both the truthfulness of his account as well as his reliability as a narrator.

Latimer’s relationship with his brother’s fiancée, Bertha, further illuminates his tendency to silence the views of those around him as well as reaffirms his lack of reliability by exposing his shortcomings within the Aristotelian understanding of sense. In his first description of his future wife, Latimer notes that Bertha’s face “had not a girlish expression: the features were sharp, the pale gray 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” (993). Here, Latimer offers his own interpretation of her character, misrepresenting these words as a simple description and undercutting the reader’s ability to analyze Bertha’s temperament independent of his observations. He could have described her as having a mature visage and pale eyes, but instead he uses words that characterize her personality more than her physical attributes. Rather than offering an unbiased characterization of his future wife and allowing for the interpretations of his readers, Latimer undermines his readers’ judgment by offering his own interpretation alongside his factual accounts, blurring observation with analysis.

Here, his credibility is undermined by his lack of character. As Aristotle explained, a man of character has “neither that excess of confidence which amounts to rashness, nor too much timidity, but the right amount of each. They neither trust everybody nor distrust everybody, but judge people correctly” (2215). Latimer’s inability to judge Bertha correctly and, by extension, allow the audience to do the same, leads Latimer to further destroy his credibility.

Additionally, the chronology of his story limits the reader’s ability to objectively assess Bertha’s character. Though this is something that may be said of most narratives, the order of events is all the more relevant in this text as its narrator is making claims of telepathy. With the opening words of his narrative, Latimer is able to shape the reader’s view of Bertha long before she is introduced: “I have no near relatives who will make up, by weeping over my grave, for the wounds they have inflicted on me when I was among them” (987). By foreshadowing his isolation prior to introducing the reader to his wife, Latimer takes away the readers’ ability to form their own informed opinion of Bertha’s character. It is challenging to warm to a character when the reader has already been told of the irreparable “wounds they have inflicted” on the narrator.

In addition to controlling the ways in which he represents Bertha, Latimer limits her ability to represent herself through her own words. Though this is something characteristic of all narrators, Latimer seems motivated to do so by a desire to control the audience’s perception of his wife. In the same way he wishes for his brother to remain silent, Latimer strives to remove Bertha’s voice from his narrative. Her dialogue does not appear until well into the story, and what words she is allowed depict her as a flirtatious coquette who sought “to encourage all [Latimer’s] illusions, to heighten [his] boyish

passion, and make [him] more and more dependent on her smiles” (996). As Marcia Taylor points out, “Bertha has no voice. Neither does she have a history. Latimer reports that she is an orphan, adopted by her uncle and aunt, and that the uncle ‘means to provide for her... as if she were his own daughter.’ This is Bertha Grant’s personal history in its entirety” (50). Latimer does not even allow Bertha to introduce herself, but instead relies on other character’s summary of her identity. Latimer’s father clarifies Bertha’s identity as “Mrs. Filmore’s orphan niece,” pointing out that, “there is a tenderness between her and Alfred” (994). Here, Latimer not only denies Bertha the opportunity to provide her own back story, but also offers details of her inner feelings towards Alfred all without allowing her to speak for herself. In his representations of Bertha, then, Latimer shows his own inadequate wisdom, the “most finished of the forms of knowledge” (Aristotle 1801). If wisdom, by Aristotle’s estimation, is a process of continuous growth and improvement, Latimer’s wisdom should become clear in his desire to improve and grow in the relationships around him. Instead, his interactions with Bertha show no growth, only control. In refusing to change his own opinion of his wife, he undermines his credibility. The reader can assess the relationship in its entirety, observe its lack of development and judge Latimer’s wisdom accordingly.

Latimer’s final message about his wife’s character is that she is cold and cruel. Long before their engagement and Alfred’s untimely death, Latimer envisions a then married Bertha having “cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball dress; every hateful thought within her present to me... It was a moment of hell. I saw into her pitiless soul – saw its barren worldliness, its scorching hate – and felt it clothe me round like an air I was obliged to breathe” (998). Here, Latimer does not allow his

audience to view his marriage with Bertha objectively, having already spoken of her hatred and his unhappiness. Thorough in his representation of Bertha, he accounts for cruelty in her past, present and future, leaving little room for a reader to think otherwise about her character.

On the subject of Bertha's character, Terry Eagleton suggests that, for Latimer, "[Bertha] is a tantalizing challenge to be conquered, not least because there is oedipal satisfaction to be gained in winning your brother's fiancée" (58). In fact, Eagleton is not the only theorist to focus his or her attention on Bertha. Many of the story's critics have found Bertha fascinating, if for no other reason than her ability to shut out Latimer's clairvoyant intrusions. In this, Latimer's obsession with Bertha is mirrored by Eliot's readers' fascination with uncovering her true identity. The mystery, for Eliot's fans, drives their obsession just as Latimer's desire for Bertha is enhanced by his inability to view her innermost thoughts. Thomas Albrecht suggests that Latimer's views toward Bertha are unfairly skewed by his views of the world at large, essentially his lack of goodwill. According to the critic's estimations, Latimer is incapable of separating the disappointed affections of his brother and father from those directed at Bertha. Instead, Albrecht argues that what Latimer observes as Bertha's cold indifference is "not so much Bertha's inner self, but rather the way in which she sees him... The way in which Bertha sees Latimer closely resembles the way in which he had earlier seen the people around him: as miserable, pitiful, and as fundamentally disconnected from one another" (442). Here, Latimer uses Bertha as a scapegoat for all of his other failed relationships. From this, it seems as if Latimer has no choice but to lack goodwill. The painful memories of his childhood and his adolescent relationships with his father and brother handicap his



ability to view the world fairly. Absent of an accurate conception of the world around him, Latimer is incapable of fostering any sense of goodwill, which only serves to further damage his credibility.

Eagleton further suggests that Latimer's representation of Bertha is skewed by his embarrassment at their first encounter. Latimer's mortification at having fainted upon their first meeting leads him to lash out at Bertha's character by way of making up for his own feelings of inadequacy. Eagleton observes:

Bertha is 'keen, sarcastic, unimaginative, prematurely cynical,' mainly because she doesn't instantly pander to his maudlin tastes in poetry. Coldly disillusioned about her, he nonetheless succeeds in remaining lamentably deluded, a contradiction which several alternative stabs at resolution can't quite dissolve. Typically, he manages to blame her for this fatal fascination while quietly complimenting himself... If only she weren't so exasperatingly aloof and he so naturally affectionate. (58)

Here, Eagleton suggests that, though Latimer's initial disappointment at his humiliation may have been understandable, the blame for their inevitable unhappiness resides in Latimer's willful refusal to adjust his opinion of Bertha after that initial exposure. His advances are unwelcome; therefore, she *must* be cold and heartless. Latimer allows for no other explanation, not the least of which would be her prior engagement to his older brother. Here, then, is a second view of Latimer's motivations. Albrecht's argument suggests that his representation of Bertha stems from deeply rooted memories from his painful childhood, while Eagleton suggests that Latimer's story is a deliberate attempt to "frame his wife" (60). While there may be room to allow both readings, it seems more

compassionate to allow that Latimer may have misrepresented elements of his narrative not necessarily out of a cruel desire for revenge, but rather from his own pain and loneliness.

Clara Hanson combines Albrecht and Eagleton's assessments of Latimer's narrative, arguing that the narrator allows his damaged pride to misconstrue Bertha's character. Ultimately, Latimer renders Bertha voiceless just as he wished his brother to have been. Hanson further suggests that this type of narration is common in Victorian literature written by women. She points to a "recurrent pattern" of "unveiling" a female character that was originally presented to the readers in "iconic terms" (137). These "iconic terms" are criticized by Eliot who, in her *Silly Novels*, offers her own satirical example of such flowery descriptions: "Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues" (978). These iconic terms, according to Eliot, are detrimental to the quality of women's writing and should be avoided whenever possible. Hanson further expands on this problem, noting that the subsequent "unveiling" of these iconic characters perpetuates a pattern in which the female characters can be "perceived as a 'nothingness' by the male narrator/protagonist" (139). Presumably, these women writers sought to extract a feeling of injustice in their readers, and, by doing so, were able to draw a parallel between the voiceless literary female and the voiceless Victorian woman. Hanson supports this reasoning, suggesting:

In texts written by men in this period, women are indeed frequently represented as a paradoxically voracious nothing, at once threatening and disavowed... Women

writers of the period seem to anticipate such a denial and disavowal, which they stage through their male protagonists and/or narrators, providing at the same time an alternative female recognition of the unmet desire which "crushes" their female heroes "to earth." (139)

If Hanson's observation that women writers often used their portrayal of female characters as a manifestation of their own feelings of "nothingness" is accurate, then it would make sense that much of the pain and loneliness felt by Latimer and displayed in his representation of Bertha would emerge out of Eliot's own professional career. In fact, much of Eliot's dismay at Liggins's authorship scandal emerged from feelings of frustration at her inability to speak on her own behalf. Lewes, acting in Eliot's interest as both editor and promoter, often portrayed the writer as a timid, self-conscious individual who could easily become discouraged by the smallest of criticism. In a letter to Blackwood on November 22, 1856, Lewes encouraged publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, writing of Eliot:

Your letter has greatly restored the shaken confidence of my friend, who is unusually sensitive, and unlike most writers is more anxious about *excellence* than about appearing in print—as his waiting so long before taking the venture proves. He is consequently afraid of failure though not afraid of obscurity; and by failure he would understand that which I suspect most writers would be apt to consider as success—so high is his ambition. I tell you think that you may understand the sort of shy, shrinking, ambitious nature you have to deal with. (Haight 277)

Here, Lewes's portrayal of his mistress does not align at all with the exclamations over his elopement with "that 'strong-minded woman' from the *Westminster Review*" (Taylor

136). This same woman later proclaimed to a friend on February 19, 1859, “who that reads the newspapers would desire praise when they can get criticism? Every fool gets praise: the little real criticism there is in the world is given only to the writers capable of making an impression” (Haight 15). As grateful as Eliot was to Lewes, her frustration at his portrayal of her professionalism frustrated her. In fact, it was Lewes who encouraged the continuation of her anonymity, noting that “mystery was good for sales” (Taylor 163). It is important to point out that Lewes’s characterization of Eliot as having a “shy, shrinking, ambitious nature” is not very different from Eliot’s descriptions of Latimer’s flaws. Here then, it is possible to draw another connection between the battle for credibility fought by both author and narrator.

From these snippets of Eliot’s personal and professional endeavors, Hanson’s assumption of Eliot’s intentions as a female author seem to fit. Eliot, frustrated at her inability to speak on her own behalf as well as at the misrepresentations of her authorship through Lewes’s portrayal and Liggins’s deception, would have perceived her own “nothingness” on an almost daily basis. With her own credibility called so sharply into question, it seems fitting that Eliot’s story would focus on similar discrepancies. However, instead of a female narrator struggling to establish her credibility through her own words, she portrays a male narrator who, in his own pain and frustration, limits the views and opinions of those around him. In this, Eliot seems to seek to discredit the male narrator’s portrayal of the female antagonist by rendering his account unreliable while still allowing for a motivating force that would not entirely demonize male writers such as Lewes. If the story is an expression of Eliot’s frustration with her own life, Latimer’s credibility can be linked to the credibility of those voices encouraging her continued

silence and anonymity. In proving that Latimer's account is skewed by his own emotional baggage, Eliot simultaneously shows that those who seek to silence her in her own life may also be skewing the truth out of their own personal reasons. In that sense, the lack of goodwill exhibited by her critics undermines their credibility, rather than Eliot's.

CHAPTER THREE: REREADING *THE LIFTED VEIL*

It seems clear that there are many reasons to doubt the accuracy of Latimer's account. His lack of credibility, as well as the emotional factors that may have influenced him while crafting his narrative, lead readers to suspect that his version of events may not be entirely factual. It is also clear that Eliot's personal and professional realities may have led her to craft the narrative in such a way as to highlight Latimer's credibility as a means of calling into question statements regarding her own anonymity and authority. Furthermore, if Latimer's credibility is called into question and the textual evidence suggests that he was motivated to endear himself to his readers regardless of the truthfulness of his account, the reader has reason to suspect that Latimer's explanation of his telepathic tendencies is not entirely truthful. Here, it is important to remember Jill Galvan's observation that, for all his pretense of prevision, Latimer is "actually narrating after the fact" (244). While presenting himself as a clairvoyant storyteller, Latimer narrates from a viewpoint that naturally calls into question such a claim. The chronology of the narrative makes it possible for Latimer to deceptively suggest clairvoyance where none may exist, and his lack of credibility and relational history makes it probable that he did just that, whether consciously or not. If Latimer's misrepresentation extends far enough to include his own telepathic abilities, it should be clear in the text itself. If, as Galvan suggests, Latimer is not clairvoyant at all, then there should be some logical way to explain the previsions he outlines for his readers. To do this requires an analysis of his vision of Prague, his first meeting with Bertha, and his expectations for their life together.

These three visions are the most detailed in the story, and illuminate most clearly the discrepancies in Latimer's account.

Latimer's first meeting with Bertha coincides with what he dubs his first experiences under a "strange new power" (993). The initial experience occurs just a few short days before their introduction. Upon his father's announcement of their impending trip to Prague, Latimer is overwhelmed by a "strange sense that a new and wondrous scene was breaking upon" him (991). He sees vivid depictions of Prague, a city he has never been to, and attributes these details to his "exceptional mental character" (986). This prevision can be easily explained in light of his description of his interactions with Charles in the preceding passage. He explains how he would spend hours half-listening to the description of places Meuner had been and things Charles hoped to accomplish. Latimer admits to mingling those descriptions "confusedly in [his] thought with glimpses of blue water and delicate floating cloud, with the notes of birds and the distant glitter of the glacier" (990). Latimer explains that his mind was "half absent" (990), suggesting that it is probable Meuner explained things that Latimer does not expressly remember. Though not specifically listed among Aristotle's guidelines for fostering ethos, Latimer's self-proclaimed tendency to allow his mind to wander speaks both to the respect for his friend as well as his own lack of mental strength. It is possible, then, that on one such occasion Charles had described the sights, sounds and smells of Prague, and it is those descriptions that enhance his revelation. Latimer, as a half-absent listener, may not have consciously absorbed the information though his mind may have sub-consciously processed it.

In the vision, Latimer is most struck by a “patch of rainbow light on the pavement, transmitted through a colored lamp in the shape of a star” (991). This further suggests the possibility that he is remembering one of Charles’s descriptions, as the transmission of light to create a rainbow is a scientific concept. Latimer, concerned primarily with aesthetic elements, may have been interested in the beauty of a rainbow, but describing it in such terms suggests a more scientific appreciation of the prism affect of a rainbow that would have resulted from the star-shaped, colored lamp. Rather, it was Charles whose “strongest passion was science” (990), suggesting that the description of Prague may, in fact, have been his memory and appreciation of the light particles at work and not Latimer’s vision. In this sense, this vision may serve to compensate for Latimer’s lack of scientific aptitude by suggesting the presence of a subconscious interest that only emerges during his visions.

Latimer’s second vision is no more reliable, although perhaps slightly more believable. Awaiting his father’s entrance, he has an abrupt prevision of his first interaction with Bertha. Following his vision, he trembles and can “only totter forward and throw [himself] on the sofa” (993). However, a few lines prior he explains that in light of his father’s lateness he seems unable to “sit still and reserve [his] strength” and decides to pace the room (993). Hoping to regain his strength and calm his nerves, he enters his bedroom, opens a bottle of eau-de-Cologne and rubs “the reviving spirit over [his] hands and forehead” (993). Such an act would be seen as a traditionally feminine response to trauma, but Latimer’s writing presents it in such a way as to attribute his reaction to a more spiritual cause. The desire to appear less meek is intensified by his introduction to Bertha. As Latimer explains, “I heard no more, felt no more, till I became



conscious that I was lying with my head low on the sofa” (994). Embarrassed by such a public display of weakness in front of a woman he comes to associate with his brother’s superiority, Latimer has every reason to represent the experience as the effect of a spiritual awakening rather than a physical infirmity. As he later observes:

Looking back with my present wretched knowledge, I conclude that [Bertha’s] vanity and love of power were intensely gratified by the belief that I had fainted on first seeing her purely from the strong impression her person had produced on me. The most prosaic woman likes to believe herself the object of a violent, poetic passion; and without a grain of romance in her, Bertha had that spirit of intrigue which gave piquancy to the idea that the brother of the man she meant to marry was dying with love and jealousy for her sake. (996)

In relaying this particular vision, Latimer is able to compensate for his lack of physical strength by offering up an alternative origin for his fainting fit. Rather than allowing that he “fainted on first seeing” Bertha, the narrator claims that his weakness was in fact a reaction to “what might be regarded as a pitiable peculiarity” (994). In this, he is able to use fainting as a way of reaffirming his extraordinary telepathic abilities. This vision, then, offers Latimer a way of recovering some of his masculine dignity.

Latimer’s final episode envisions Bertha with “cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball dress; every hateful thought within her present to me... It was a moment of hell. I saw into her pitiless soul -- saw its barren worldliness, its scorching hate -- and felt it clothe me round like an air I was obliged to breathe” (998). However, the credibility of this vision is also questionable as Latimer confesses to experiencing similar sensations toward a painting of Lucrezia Borgia earlier in the day:

“the cruel-eyed woman... I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation” (998). He directly associates this feeling with the sensation he gets when Bertha takes his arm, remembering, “In the same instant a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia” (998). Just as he sees the world only through poetic terms, Latimer associates his feelings toward Bertha with famous works of art.

Here, the narrator’s “early sensitivity to Nature” (989) may come into play. His love of the aesthetic and his solipsistic nature may lead him to be more creative with his account than the reader would expect. Any misrepresentations in it or lapses in objectivity could result from his nature rather than a calculated attempt to deceive his readers. However, his motivation aside, it does seem clear that Latimer’s inability to harness the rhetorical necessities of sense, excellence and goodwill and view the world objectively undermines his ability to credibly present his account. Each of Latimer’s clairvoyant episodes is easily explained in light of his circumstances or emotional state. In fact, each of these visions serves to highlight one of Latimer’s insecurities— insecurities that make it difficult for a reader to put full faith in his narrative. Whether conscious or not, these scenes clearly highlight Latimer’s strategy as a narrator. In the first scene, his father, who has disappointed Latimer by treating him differently than Alfred, has refused to allow Latimer to travel due to his health, instead promising that, when he is “quite well enough to travel,” his father will take him home by way of Tyrol, Austria, Basle, Vienna and Prague (991). Latimer’s feelings of abandonment are heightened as his father is “called away before he had finished his sentence,” and by the

reminder of his father's failure to allow Latimer to travel before (991). In this sense, this first vision of Prague serves as a way for Latimer to reconcile his feelings of abandonment and regain a sense of goodwill. The second scene satisfies a similar need in regard to Latimer's feelings of inferiority towards Alfred. As previously mentioned, Latimer's physical response to Bertha's entry explained in any other way further highlights his physical and emotional weakness when compared to his older brother. By using his "strange new power" as a simple explanation for his fainting fit, Latimer is able to rewrite the scene in a way that gives him control over the other characters since he knows something they do not. This second vision, then, offers Latimer the chance to attend to his feelings of inferiority and rebuild his excellence. Furthermore, Latimer's vision of his future marriage with Bertha gives him a way to address his unrequited love for his wife. His foreknowledge of their marriage extends him some power over her, the same way his affection for her gives Bertha power over him. His love motivates him to marry her, in spite of his certainty of their unhappiness together. By making comments about the inevitability of their relationship early on in the narrative, he is able to portray himself as a willing and knowledgeable participant in their failed marriage rather than the husband of a woman who would have much preferred to be with his brother. By Latimer's account, he entered into the marriage knowing that he would feel isolated and disappointed. Through this lens, Latimer is able to portray himself as an admirable, even brave, character for having taken on such a heavy burden. In this manner, he is able to redeem his unrequited love for Bertha and reestablish his own wisdom. Though he may be able to regain some of his credibility through his rhetorical choices in reconciling his character faults, it is important to recognize that he is not credible at the time of his

narrative. Had Latimer lived many years past his account, he may have grown to embody more sense, excellence and goodwill than is seen in this story.

Rhetorically, the most significant events in Latimer's account come at moments that involve the death of other characters. The first, of course, was the death of Latimer's mother, though all the reader is told about her death is that her "unequaled love" soon "vanished" out of his life, leaving him somber and listless (988). The second death in the novel is much more detailed and significant. Alfred, the reader is told, "had been pitched from his horse, and killed on the spot by a concussion of the brain," a very masculine death (1004). Curiously, a few pages prior to this revelation, Latimer narrates one of the few scenes of dialogue between the two brothers, reflecting:

One mild morning in the beginning of November, it happened that I was standing outside the portico... when the groom brought up my brother's horse which was to carry him to the hunt, and my brother himself appeared at the door, florid, broad-chested, and self-complacent, feeling what a good-natured fellow he was not to behave insolently to us all on the strength of his great advantages. (1002)

Latimer goes on to describe the intense feelings of bitterness and hatred he had toward his brother, noting that Alfred was full of "ready dullness, healthy selfishness [and] good-tempered conceit" (1002). Latimer tells of how later that day he goes to see Bertha and, forgetting himself, asks her about their future life together: "shall you love me when we are first married? I would not mind if you really loved me only for a little while" (1003). Though Latimer passes off his embarrassing disclosure as a symptom of his clairvoyance, it could easily be interpreted as something much more sinister. After all, Latimer was the last one to see his brother (and his horse) before the accident. It is possible that he knew

of his brother's imminent death because he had a hand in it. Perhaps it was *that* knowledge that led to his verbal faux pas rather than any imagined insight. As Beryl Gray suggests, Latimer's "persistent quest for fulfillment is no more than a quest for self-gratification, no matter what the cost to others or the future cost to himself, and it earns him the protracted torment of alienation from humanity itself which culminates in a death bereft of consolation" (76). Such logic would imply that killing his own brother to serve selfish ends would not be outside of Latimer's natural inclinations, and that misrepresenting it in his narrative would align with his previous emotional distress and lack of credibility.

Furthermore, Latimer had many things to gain from his brother's demise. According to Eagleton, Latimer "feels compassion for his father only when he has triumphed over him through Alfred's death" (58) at which point it is no longer necessary to continue comparing himself to his elder brother. Instead, Latimer observes his father's despair, admitting, "I should have been stung by the perception that my father transferred the inheritance of an eldest son to me with a mortified sense that fate had compelled him to the unwelcome course of caring for me as an important being" (1004). Yet Latimer does not feel the sting of this pain because the rivalry between his brother and him is no longer of any importance. It died with Alfred, and in its place grew an obsessive desire to please his father, just as Alfred had done while he was alive. As Latimer remembers, "Gradually, however, my new deference to [my father's] wishes, the effect of that patience which was born of my pity for him, won upon his affection, and he began to please himself with the endeavor to make me fill my brother's place as fully as my feebler personality would admit" (1005). Of course, the quickest and clearest way to

assume Alfred's former position is to marry his fiancée, a possibility that was both welcome to his father and comforting to Latimer who reflects that the months preceding his marriage to Bertha were "the happiest time [he] had known since childhood" (1004). His father, too, was happy with the prospect, feeling confident that the marriage would "complete the desirable modification" of Latimer's character, making him "practical and worldly" enough to enter good, "sane" society (1006).

Unfortunately, the marriage did not turn out to be a happy one, and more death followed Alfred's demise. Though the first few "excited months" of marriage proved full and enjoyable, the relationship showed signs of deterioration upon his father's death. Eagleton suggests an interesting reason for this dissipation. He argues:

Desire—economic or sexual—requires knowledge, but that knowledge would in turn be the death of desire. Knowledge is power, but the more you have of it the more it threatens to rob you of your desire and render you impotent. If the future can be known it ceases properly to exist; and the present ceases to be present too, it dwindles to a mere prolepsis which takes its meaning from elsewhere. (55)

According to Eagleton, Latimer's desire dies with the knowledge and experience of its fulfillment. Without his brother to challenge or his father to please, Latimer loses all interest in and desire for Bertha. The narrator recalls that the night his father died, the "veil which had shrouded Bertha's soul" was lifted, finally allowing him to see her clearly. He remembers how he looked in her estimation, noting that he saw himself in her "cutting grey eyes" (1007). This description seems to suggest that part of Bertha's mystery was her inability to clearly see Latimer. Once the veil had been lifted between the two of them, each seeing the other plainly, their unhappiness is apparent. Bertha now

seems even more foreign to Latimer, and he admits that his wife will never fully understand him as he lives “under influences utterly invisible to her” (1008). Yet in the absence of family members to impress, Latimer must turn to some other outlet for sympathy and comfort. As he suggests in the early pages of his confession, he hopes to elicit such a response from his readers: “It is only the story of my life that will perhaps win a little more sympathy from strangers when I am dead, than I ever believed it would obtain from my friends while I was living” (987). As Johnson observes, in this Latimer is hypocritical. As he has never “‘unbosomed’ himself to anyone belonging to his personal circle” it is ironic that he “seeks sympathy from ‘strangers,’ his readers” (par. 5). Yet, it is this very desire for sympathy and affection that contributes greatly to his lack of credibility and allows for his deception. Desperate for some recognition or affection before his death, Latimer seems to misconstrue the events in his narrative, whether consciously or unconsciously.

This misrepresentation is most clear in Latimer’s explanation of months leading up to his separation from Bertha. The final pages of the story highlight Latimer’s major faults, highlighting the realness associated with his childhood isolation, the delusional aspects of his previsions, and the rhetorical inconsistencies of his narrative. As Latimer explains, he and Bertha have ceased to live together at the time of his narration. Instead, she lives “in her own neighborhood, the mistress of half our wealth... pitied and admired; for what had I against that charming woman, whom everyone but myself could have been happy with?” (1015). Here, Latimer points out something rather significant about the public perception of their separation. His words suggest that those around them are unaware of the “true” reason behind the dissolution of their marriage. It seems strange

that a narrator who has shown no prior hesitancy to exploit the shortcomings of his family members should, upon learning of his wife's plot to have him killed, neglect to immediately make the story public. If his true object is to gain sympathy, then it seems uncharacteristic of what the reader understands of his desires to stop short of a measure that would ensure overwhelming compassion and support from those around him. In fact, Latimer offers no explanation of his choice, simply noting that the truth of the events will die with him. Instead, he continues to let those who would pity and admire her do exactly that, imagining him to be a cold, heartless husband and she a wronged woman. The strangeness of this choice merits a reexamining of his final thoughts on their marriage.

The final year of their marriage is heralded by the addition of a new character, Mrs. Archer, who Bertha has hired to replace a maid who has recently left to get married. Latimer's alienation from his wife is already long-established when Mrs. Archer is introduced into the narrative. The reader has been told of Bertha's exceptional wit and beauty as well as how society at large considers it unfortunate that so charming a woman be trapped in an unpleasant marriage to such a weak, feeble man. Latimer himself admits, "my one ardent desire had spent itself... I had no desires" (1008). Their marriage, at least on his side, is passionless, presumably loveless and perhaps even sexless. Their isolation is widely spoken of, as even the servants gossiped about the estrangement, commenting that the "mistress went out a great deal, and seemed to dislike the master's society" (1008), such was the state of their marriage long before Bertha hired a new maid.

Mrs. Archer is first described by Latimer as a self-confident coquette who is not to be trusted (1009). She became a quick favorite of Bertha's; however, he notices that



after a “lapse of eight or nine months” Bertha seemed to both fear and depend on her maid. Latimer later attributes this change to a trip the two women embarked on:

There had been some quarrel between Bertha and this maid, apparently during a visit to a distant family, in which she had accompanied her mistress. I had overheard Archer speaking in a tone of bitter insolence, which I should have thought an adequate reason for immediate dismissal. No dismissal followed; on the contrary, Bertha seemed to be silently putting up with personal inconveniences from the exhibitions of this woman's temper. (1012)

This passage seems significant in two primary ways. First, the reader is told upon first meeting Bertha that she is an orphan with no family other than her aunt and uncle (994). It seems suspicious then that absent of any other evidence of familial connections, Bertha would travel to visit distant relatives. Additionally, Latimer notices changes in Bertha prior to her trip abroad. He reflects, “I could not help perceiving something triumphant and excited in her carriage and the expression of her face – something too subtle to express itself in words or tones, but giving one the idea that she lived in a state of expectation or hopeful suspense” (1010). Furthermore, Latimer also reflects on a conversation between Bertha and him in which she admits a prior suspicion that he was clairvoyant, a sense which she had long ago abandoned after observing that he had “become rather duller than the rest of the world” (1011). To this, Latimer notes that “it had occurred to me that her recent obtrusion of herself upon me might have been prompted by the wish to test my power of detecting some of her secrets,” though he further assures readers that “her motives and deeds had no interest for me, and whatever pleasures she might be seeking, I had no wish to balk her” (1011). At this point, Latimer

has already admitted that his powers of observation and “clairvoyant” tendencies are failing him, leading the reader to assume that at least his future self can recognize his own lack of scrutiny. Moreover, Latimer’s observations that Bertha’s “carriage” had shifted and that she seemed to live in a “state of expectation or hopeful suspense” could suggest that Bertha was, in fact, expecting a child.

The subtleness of language here merits an explanation of Eliot’s other literary references to pregnancy. Jill Matus explains that, upon publication of *Adam Bede* in 1859, a critic from the *Saturday Review* took issue with the level of specificity Eliot employed when describing Hetty’s pregnancy. The reviewer noted, “We seem to be threatened with the literature of pregnancy... This is intolerable. Let us copy the old masters of the art, who, if they gave us a baby, gave it to us all at once. A decent author and a decent public may take the premonitory symptoms for granted” (1). However, as Matus further explains, Eliot’s story “offers but a few details and symptoms of Hetty’s pregnancy, and those are euphemistically expressed” (2). Matus argues that the outcry at Eliot’s veiled description of pregnancy “confirms the old stereotype of Victorian prudishness about the representation of sexuality and sexual relations” (3). If Eliot’s explanation that Hetty had “a more luxuriant womanliness about [her] as late” (405), was too risqué for her Victorian readers, it would make sense for her to obscure any additional characterization of pregnancy in order to avoid further criticism. Thus, the lack of clarity regarding a possible pregnancy in *The Lifted Veil* may be the result of Eliot’s sensitivity to such “prudish” criticism.

If Bertha were pregnant as Eliot’s language seems to suggest, such a scenario would explain Latimer’s hesitancy to publically disclose the true reason for their

separation. Any latent desire he may have to discredit his wife as a way of gaining the sympathy of his readers could be trumped only by a desire to overcome his own inadequacies. As the bitter recipient of a crippling physical ailment, a man who had felt emasculated by his brother and father all his life, Latimer would have been humiliated by the scandalous revelation that his own wife had become pregnant by another man. Seven years of marriage had failed to produce a child, and his wife's potential fertility with another rival would only serve as an additional reminder of his physical inferiority. In every other way he was able to triumph over his brother. Upon his brother's death, Latimer inherited Alfred's opportunities, his money, his father's admiration, and his fiancée. Latimer's failure to continue his triumph through to completion by providing an heir would serve as a painful reminder of his own physical inadequacies.

Furthermore, an adulterous pregnancy would reaffirm Bertha's lack of affection and the ultimate failure of his clairvoyance. If Bertha had, in fact, been able to carry on an extramarital affair without his knowledge, he would indeed be accurate in noting, "I had become entirely free from insight, from my abnormal cognizance of any other consciousness than my own, and, instead of intruding involuntarily into the world of other minds, was living continually in my own solitary future" (1010). Instead of admitting to these possible failures, he would have to shift the narrative to placate his last bit of pride. Poison, then, might simply be a stand-in for Bertha's real crime. However, lacking the sense and excellence required for true originality and invention, Latimer could not simply create a new narrative, fictionalizing every detail. Rather, he would have to draw enough details from reality to provide him with sufficient ammunition to distort the truth. This would explain the remaining traces of a possible unplanned

pregnancy. His most creative measure, then, would be in switching out Bertha for Mrs. Archer in the final blood transfusion scene, swapping one “coquette” for another and portraying the episode as the maid’s illness and rebirth rather than Bertha’s pregnancy and labor.

This switch manifests itself most clearly in terms of Meuner’s diagnosis of Mrs. Archer’s peritonitis (1012). On the surface, there is really nothing exceptional about this particular illness; however, its materializations share many distinguishing features symptomatic of pregnancy. Patients suffering from peritonitis complain of exhaustion, irritability, nausea and, most importantly, swelling of the abdomen (Mayo Clinic). The similarities between Mrs. Archer’s illness and those symptoms associated with pregnancy could be coincidental. However, when combined with the eight or nine months she worked for Bertha, the servants’ observation that Bertha “went out a great deal,” the extended trip the two women took, Bertha’s assertion that Latimer was “duller” than the rest of the world, and Latimer’s admission that he had little interest in what “pleasures” his wife might be enjoying, there seems to be enough support to suggest that Bertha had, perhaps, engaged in some extramarital activities that resulted in a pregnancy, and that Latimer had potentially edited the details of the final scene to suggest that Mrs. Archer was the one suffering from these complaints rather than Bertha.

This reading leads to a reexamination of the infamous “revivifying experiment” that John Blackwood strongly encouraged Eliot to remove prior to the story’s publication (Haight 67). In fact, many of the story’s critics have paid special attention to Mrs. Archer’s blood transfusion, recognizing its apparent disparity with the remainder of the narrative. Elliot Rubenstein noted that it was one of the “awkward moments” in the story,

explaining that it “bears at best a very uneasy connection with the preceding matter” (182). Furthermore, Eagleton classified the episode as “a piece of tawdry melodrama, a grotesque and infelicitous flaw, a *fiction*,” reminding readers of Latimer’s thinly veiled attempt to rig “the tale to frame his wife” as evidence of the unreliability of this final scene (58). Given what is known of Eliot’s consistency of style throughout all of her other novels and her attempts to characterize Latimer in ways similar to heroines in her other stories, it seems strange that she would unintentionally shift her narrative methods so dramatically. If the blood transfusion scene jars the reader out of the narrative, Eliot’s stylistic consistency throughout her other stories suggests the possibility that the scene should feel incongruous. In fact, the author’s desire to include this scene was intense enough to lead her to ignore the editorial suggestions of her publisher and friend. What can be concluded from this, then, is that the episode is purposefully disjointed from the rest of the narrative. In light of Latimer’s apparent unreliability and deception, it seems fair to assume that this episode could serve as further evidence of Latimer’s dishonesty. In this final scene, his misrepresentation of reality has progressed so far from the truth as to become transparent and unbelievable to his readers. As Eagleton muses, “We can’t believe it; and yet of course we must, for this is a ‘realist’ tale, and within those conventions what Latimer as observer says goes. It must have happened—Bertha must therefore be guilty—and yet, somehow, it didn’t” (58). The episode, then, could be the greatest of all the narrator’s unreliable misrepresentations.

If Latimer has deceived his audience about his close family, his clairvoyance, and his responsibility, it seems reasonable to assume that his wife’s potential adulterous pregnancy would lead to his most jarring and unbelievable explanation yet. Having

already established a connection between Mrs. Archer's peritonitis and complaints symptomatic of pregnancy that really belong to Bertha, all that would remain would be for him to connect the blood transfusion and momentary revival of the dead maid to Bertha's predicament. Kate Flint provides this detail, noting that in Victorian culture blood transfusions were highly sexualized. She explains:

Blood transfusions, especially when they are between a man and a woman, as in *The Lifted Veil*, provide a powerful image for this disturbing challenging of symbolic as well as physical boundaries. Medical writings, moreover, helped to sexualize the practice of blood transfusion, since it was most commonly carried out on women who were about to give birth or who had just given birth. It was recommended, too, that men rather than women supply the vital fluid, since they were less liable to faint. (469)

Here, the text aligns perfectly with Flint's observations. The transfusion administered with Charles Meuner's blood following the cessation of the maid's symptoms and her subsequent rebirth all connect the scene to that of childbirth.

Though Eagleton does not go so far as to suggest such an alternative reading, he does agree that Latimer's account of these last scenes is unreliable at best. He believes that Latimer has "rigged his tale to frame his wife, impudently concocting an event as he may have previously, perhaps more permissibly, falsified perceptions" (60). He further notes that this is a "wholly impermissible conclusion, unverifiable and unacceptable within realist hypotheses, and yet, knowing Latimer, who would put it past him?" (60). As a bitter, unreliable narrator, his account is not to be trusted. Though Latimer's narrative tells a much different account of Mrs. Archer's deathbed confession, he admits

that the only other witness was dead: “There had been no witness of the scene in the dying room except Meunier, and while Meunier lived his lips were sealed by a promise to me” (1015). This promise effectively silences Meunier, allotting Latimer full control over his narrative choices. By forgoing his credibility and telling his own version of the story, Latimer is able to preserve some of his pride as well as elicit additional sympathy from his readers. There is no way of being entirely confident in the events of the narrative; however, the reader’s lack of confidence severs Latimer’s last thread of credibility. In this sense, Latimer’s lack of ethos silences him just as he strives to silence Alfred, Charles and Bertha.

## CONCLUSION: DRAWING BACK THE CURTAIN

Though Latimer begins his account with the intention of filling his audience with feelings of sympathy and compassion, his failure to establish a strong rapport with his readers built on his ethos as a man of character undermines his efforts. Instead, he is successful only in his attempt to silence those closest to him, even going so far as to ultimately negate his own voice. Here, the narrator's struggle is mirrored by his author's. Eliot, frustrated at her own limitations as a female author in a field dominated by men, seems to have felt stifled by the lack of control she had in her professional life. The authority she allowed Lewes to maintain in editing her texts and communicating with her publisher expanded her own sense of voicelessness. Publishing her work under a pseudonym, Eliot had few outlets to speak on her own behalf, something which became clear through her attempts to silence the false claims of Liggins. The "strong-minded woman from the *Westminster Review*" was as limited by her gender as Latimer is by his inadequacies. Just as Latimer does, Eliot would have perceived her own "shortcomings" on a daily basis. With her own credibility called so sharply into question, it seems fitting that Eliot would write a story that highlighted similar struggles in her narrator. Yet, instead of a female storyteller struggling to find her own voice, Eliot portrays a male narrator who struggles to establish and maintain his own credibility. If the story is an expression of Eliot's frustration with her own life, then Latimer's credibility can be linked to the credibility of those voices such as Blackwood encouraging her continued silence and anonymity. Even George Henry Lewes seemed to silence Eliot, contributing greatly to her inability to maintain control over her professional life. In proving that



Latimer's account is skewed by his own emotional deficiencies, Eliot simultaneously shows that those who seek to silence the author in her own life may also be skewing the truth for personal reasons.

Lewes personally addressed himself to questions of Eliot's anonymity, assuring a friend that "the object of anonymity was to get [Eliot's work] judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman" (Haight 106). However, Lewes's view that the success of the text should outweigh Eliot's pride and accomplishment as an author, may not be shared by the writer. In fact, during her tirade against silly novels, Eliot notes that, "No sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized" (984). This statement, while pointing out that women's writing is more severely criticized than that written by men, also implies that the authors of these "moderately praised" texts are at least known to be women, something that Eliot had yet to experience when writing *The Lifted Veil*. Due to Lewes's depiction of her as a "shy, shrinking" writer as well as Blackwood's tendency to pander to "perceived public opprobrium" (Willis 201), Eliot lost any independence and control she otherwise may have exercised over her own texts. In regard to Eliot's credibility, it was not so much that readers believed "good men more fully and more readily than others" (Aristotle 2155), but rather that Victorian readers believed men in general more fully than women. Furthermore, the disparity between culturally constructed gender roles and Eliot's talent as a writer grew even larger in light of her questionable personal life. As Willis observes, the revelation of the true Eliot identity shifted public opinion: "Marian Evans was no longer George Eliot the writer but George Eliot the immoral woman" (201). Here, Willis

is able to clearly distinguish between the two roles embodied by George Eliot, roles that are also mirrored in the text of *The Lifted Veil*.

Given the similarities between her battle for control over her professional work and Latimer's search for credibility, it seems natural to draw the conclusion that Eliot's depictions of the narrator bear biographical significance. However, it seems equally clear that Eliot's powerlessness as a Victorian woman is paralleled by Bertha's voicelessness in the story. The events of the narrative, then, tell two stories. The first and more obvious storyline focuses on an author's search for credibility and authority. The second, more obscured plot centers on a woman desperately seeking power and control over her life. In this sense, Bertha's story chronicles the life of Marian Evans the woman while Latimer's narrative is an account of George Eliot the author. These strange biographical elements would account for the unique narrative voice in this story, as it would seem natural for Eliot to employ a first-person narrator to speak on her own behalf. Additionally, the incongruous elements in the story that jar the reader out of the narrative could serve as further evidence of the incompatible characterizations of Bertha and Latimer. The two characters cannot coexist effectively in the story just as Eliot and Evans cannot thrive simultaneously in Victorian England.

In addition to the biographical elements in the story, Eliot also seems to incorporate details characteristic of a broader Victorian society. The author's use of clairvoyant episodes in the text is evidence of Eliot's ability to exploit cultural trends that are widely popular and, at the same time, highly controversial. As Jill Galvan observes, "Victorian skeptics dismissed alleged clairvoyant prophecies of death as matters of self-suggestion in nervously disordered minds" (243). Her assumption that spiritual

skepticism based its objections on the mental instability of supposed clairvoyants draws on an important point. Just as Latimer's account is rendered unreliable by his character, Victorians judged the merit of Spiritualism based on the character of spiritualists. Peter Lamont supports this argument noting that these skeptical views "were less the result of a crisis of faith than the cause of a crisis of evidence" (897). In fact, Lamont points out that while there was more evidence to corroborate miraculous acts of Spiritualism than to verify some Biblical miracles, the cultural support for the latter lent credibility to its supernatural elements whereas the perceived unreliability of Spiritualism led many to question the testimony of known clairvoyants. Just as Latimer's character undermines his ethos, the credibility of Spiritualism was limited by public perceptions about the quality and reliability of its proponents. Furthermore, as Marlene Tromp points out, Spiritualism represented an anomaly in culturally-constructed gender roles. As she points out:

Spiritualism undermined the very social structures that defined a narrow circuit of behavior for women... it granted women a new kind of self-determination, a self-determination that led to many unconventional choices. These women could channel a spirit of any temperament or character, embody and, in some sense, become whomever they might choose. They controlled, at each séance, what and who they would be, and, furthermore, could claim heavenly authorization for those choices—or any other choices they might make. (68)

This statement draws attention back to the biographic elements in the text, offering further evidence that Eliot may have used Latimer as a way of expressing her own search for credibility. Tromp's assertion that Spiritualism allowed Victorian practitioners to "become whomever they might choose" could easily parallel Marian Evans's choice to

become George Eliot. In this sense, the use of telepathic modes, while troubling due to Latimer's unreliability as a narrator, still serves an important function in the story in that it allows the reader yet another glimpse at Eliot's professional struggles. Her incorporation of these spiritual elements, then, is purposeful.

As Aristotle noted, all rhetoric should serve purpose. Eliot's story is no exception. Unsuccessful in comparison to her other work, *The Lifted Veil* stands out as a way to further understand not only the problem of credibility when working with unreliable narrators but also as a means to better interpret the professional realities facing George Eliot in the face of Victorian cultural constraints. Though the connection is clear between Eliot's professional struggles and Latimer's attempts to overcome his personal defects and lack of credibility, the connection between those shortcomings and his deception still merits further examination. There is room for more investigation into Latimer's motivation, and there are still many questions to answer as to the level of strategy and purpose that went into his narrative. Though Latimer may have desired sympathy, he was not successful in acquiring it. The inconsistencies and misrepresentations in his narrative, while understandable in light of his emotional inadequacy, negate his credibility as an objective storyteller. There is still far too much in his narrative that calls into question its accuracy. Henry James was, therefore, accurate in his observation that *The Lifted Veil* was a difficult story due to the contradiction between the narrator and the narrative, yet that is where the strength of the text lies. As her only first-person narrative, Eliot seems to have used the unique narrative structure in order to incorporate biographical elements into the story. Though she may be a credible and accomplished storyteller by modern standards, those are not traits she bestows on her narrator. Yet, there is something

admirable and compelling in Latimer's narration, and it is one that definitely merits more continued critical attention. Just as the narrator observed his death as a "moving curtain" (1015) between earth and sky, perhaps it is possible to see further critical endeavors as additional attempts to draw the curtain back, exposing a connection not only between Latimer and his narrative, but Eliot and her ethos.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> These critics include George Levine in "Determination and Responsibility," Terry Eagleton in "Power and Knowledge in *The Lifted Veil*," Kate Flint in "Blood, Bodies, and *The Lifted Veil*," and Thomas Albrecht in "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*."

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