



## **A Psychoanalytical Perspective: The Concept of Compassion in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil***

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### **Abstract**

The present paper aims to investigate the concept of compassion in George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859). The central argument is that compassion is one of the essential conceptions that should take into awareness to probe and reveal the insight natural expressions of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. The study sheds light upon the different forms of compassion such as sympathy, love and friendship and the major impact of each of them on the protagonists' development. The study relies on the psychoanalytic perspective in analyzing the concept of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. Psychoanalytic theories of compassion such as Personality Theory propose that compassion has significant impacts on the life of human beings. The study focuses on the various theories proposed by Sigmund Freud concerning early-childhood development which stress the seriousness of childhood stories and their struggles in the development of adults. In addition to that, the study is based on a close reading of Eliot's literary texts and followed by a literary analysis of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. The study focuses on Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* and could be applied to other works. Moreover, the reading of Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil* could be used to promote her work as valuable to contemporary readers because of the ideas her work has on people.

**Key words:** George Eliot; Compassion; *The Lifted Veil*; Psychoanalysis; Sympathy

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper discusses the significance of the concept of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. Mary Ann Evans also known as George Eliot is an English writer who was one of the remarkable novelists during the nineteenth century. She wrote many novels, poems, and journals, and she was considered as a prominent writer in the Victorian era. Her work was of a great value because she concentrated on shedding light upon the realistic as well as the psychological sides of the individuals.

The simple meaning of compassion involves the feelings for a person who is suffering and the motivation to provide help. Goetz and Simon-Thaomas (2017) clarify that compassion is conceived as a state of concern for the suffering or unmet need of another, coupled with a desire to alleviate that suffering. Also, Stuchebrukhov (2006) remarks that Eliot's expression of compassion, through characters who are under suffering, is very effective. She places particular emphasis on the moral positive of compassion.

The psychoanalytic approach as proposed by Sigmund Freud has acquired a prominent position in the study of literature, as well as in the general field of literary criticism. Psychoanalysis presents readers and literary critics alike with the opportunity to analyze and interpret the various traits, motives, and personalities of characters that appear in any literary text. Of central concern to this study is the psychoanalytic theory of compassion whose central proposition is that a significant part of the habits, motives, and personality traits exhibited by the characters in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* show the importance of the concept of compassion.

The significance of this study is that it highlights that the concept of compassion is a pervasive idea that has not been sufficiently studied in Eliot's work, and especially in *The Lifted Veil*. The study focuses on the employment of the concept of compassion used by Eliot that illustrates the typical life of the people in the Nineteenth Century.

However, the purpose of this investigation is to show the major role of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* in shaping the characters' mentalities and attitudes as well as their relationship to each other and society. The concept of compassion illuminates how the relationship between the characters in *The Lifted veil* leads to a better understanding of these characters' ways of thinking.

The use of psychoanalysis to analyze literary texts gained momentum after the father of psychology—Sigmund Freud—posited that psychoanalysis was not only crucial in accounting for the development and practices of fields such as religion and education but could also be useful in disciplines such as literature (Hoffman, 1950). As noted earlier, the study relies on psychoanalytic theories of compassion such as Personality Theory proposes that compassion has significant impacts on the life of human beings. The study also focuses on Freud's discussion of the effects of childhood experiences on the life of adults.

However, the present study does not necessarily focus on mental disorders that point to the maladjustment of adults. Instead, it confines itself to using the evidence available in the novella to study the psyche of the main character and to demonstrate how his childhood psychological development directly influences his adult life experiences. One cannot overestimate the significance of the various psychoanalytic theories of child development explored here. As Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim (2000) note in their essay, "no analysis of adulthood experiences is complete without paying due regard to the childhood experiences that the said adult had" (p. 686).

Overall, psychoanalytic theories of child development maintain that "certain childhood events and experiences, the accumulation of such events and experiences, and the environment within which children grow all affect the adulthood experiences of a person" (Heim & Nemeroff, 2001, p.1030). Additionally, the study focuses on analyzing the main components of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* such as the plot, the characters, and the setting that illustrate the importance of the concept of compassion in the novella.

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## 1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

As stated before, compassion is one of the essential concepts that should take into consideration to investigate Eliot's techniques in probing and revealing the insight natural expressions of compassion through analysing and identifying the protagonists' feelings, emotions and motivations in her novella *The Lifted Veil*. So, the particular aim of the study is to deal with compassion as being very significant in the general understanding of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. Therefore, the present paper tries to identify the author's intention/s in employing compassion in this selected novel.

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## 2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Critics studied Eliot because she is an influential writer who depicts the lives of the people in the Nineteenth Century. For example, Dolin (2016) is presented on cultural-political circumstances in which novelist Marcus Clarke rewrote the book *The Lifted Veil* of **George Eliot**. It focuses on the imposture and impersonation encouraged by colonial isolation and mass migration, and shows the relationship of free trade and protectionism conflict with cultural sphere conflict. Besides, **Eliot** and T.S. **Eliot** (2015) offer a literary criticism for the book *The Lifted Veil*. Also, Greiner (2009) explores omniscience and the failure of sympathy in **Eliot's** novels *Middlemarch* and *The Lifted Veil*. Also, Galvan (2006) criticizes **Eliot's** tale *The Lifted Veil* by viewing Latimer as a narrator and by scrutinizing his capacities and goals. Whereas, Willis (2005) discusses the authorship, perceptibility and style of **Eliot** in the book *The Lifted Veil*. In addition, McKenzie (1984) focuses on the realistic perspectives in the works of **Eliot** and Proust included *The Lifted Veil*. These articles and studies will be used as a means of engaging in the different perspectives on Eliot's literary work.

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## 3. METHOD

The present study is based on the psychoanalytical approach in the discussion of the idea of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. Different psychoanalytical theories such as Personality Theory and Freud's theory of Early-Childhood Development will be used to come up with the best comprehension of compassion in Eliot's *The Lifted veil*. The research will rely on a close-reading of the major works of George Eliot to illustrate the theme further. The analysis will depend on many sources either online sources (websites) or books and articles relating to the topic. The study will be based on a close reading of Eliot's literary texts and is followed by literary analysis. The researcher focuses on analyzing the main components of the work such as the plot, the characters, the setting that illustrate how the compassion is depicted in the novella. The researcher will also discuss the stylistic devices used by Eliot such as symbolism, irony, mood, character development, etc, which are given high importance as supportive tools to clarify the important role of the idea of compassion in the Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*.

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## 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The story of *The Lifted Veil* describes the protagonist of Latimer, the narrator of the story, as being cursed by visions of the future and cacophony of other people's thoughts. Latimer had intimacy feeling towards Bertha,

his brother's fiancée. Her passionate for her was a result of his incapability of reading her thoughts. That made her stands as a mystery for him, and made Latimer more passionate about her. Latimer managed to marry Bertha after his brother's death. However, this marriage was marked by Bertha sense of superiority over Latimer. When finally became capable of reading Bertha's thoughts, Latimer found out that he was a subject of manipulation. He discovered that Bertha carries hatred feeling towards him and wish nothing but his death. His relationship to Bertha made Latimer in great need for compassion and sympathy since this relationship was the only thing that closes him to normality, but unfortunately this positive thing in his life vanished.

The concept of compassion has a great significance in illuminating the mentalities of the character of Latimer, as well as other characters. The story is narrated by Latimer who is the protagonist. This leads the reader to enter deep into Latimer's mind and know his motives throughout the story. Whether the narrator is reliable, medium, or unreliable, the readers must take advantage of knowing Latimer's purposes and motives by telling his story.

The whole story is considered to be a call for compassion. The narrator starts by describing the melancholic situation he experiences, "the time of my end approaches ... for I foresee when I shall die, and everything that will happen in my last moments" (Eliot, p.2). As being cursed with clairvoyance, Latimer can foresee the day of his death. Admitting that his death is so close, his story seems to be to the readers as a deathbed confession. Psychological speaking, it is expected from Latimer to tell a story of secrets, guilt, pain, and most importantly a story to gain relief. Continuing in the description of his end, Latimer illustrates his instability by stating that he is cursed physically and mentally. Latimer gives an accurate vision of what is going to happen to him on his death day. He states that "at ten o'clock at night, longing to die, weary of incessant insight and foresight, without delusions and without hope" (Ibid, p.2).

Such an accurate description is an evidence of a man is suffering from alienation and in need of compassion. According to Personality Theory, it is important to have identification with the suffering of other people, and so, compassion becomes a necessity. Similarly, Latimer tries to put his readers in his suffering so that he can gain some sympathy and compassion from them.

Declaring that he has no one by his side; no family, relatives or friends, Latimer states the reason beyond telling his story. He states that "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" (Ibid, p.3). The purpose of telling the story is to get compassion from non-known visitors. The sympathy he has never obtained in his life might be obtained when he is dead. Given that

the story revolves in some of its parts around the notion of family, home, and belonging, thus psychoanalytic theories of child development will be especially useful in deciphering how the childhood experiences of the protagonist in the story continue to influence the adulthood life he is leading. The role of childhood experiences on the life of adults is evidence if Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*. According to Peters (2012), "the field of psychoanalysis generally maintains that any insight into a person's adult behavioral traits has to begin with a critical analysis of their upbringing" (P. 27). Latimer describes his stage of childhood when he lost his mother. He states;

That unequalled love soon vanished out of my life, and even to my childish consciousness it was as if that life had become more chill ... Perhaps I missed my mother's love more than most children of seven or eight would have done, to whom the other pleasures of life remained as before; for I was certainly a very sensitive child (Eliot, p.4).

Latimer's childhood is typical in the Nineteenth century. Latimer is recalling his misery in his childhood after losing his mother. This suggestion might be explained that his current misery is a consequence or an extension of his childhood misery. Since then, Latimer has been seeking his true identity. Peters asserts that "using the psychoanalytic approach in so far as bildungsroman is concerned—provides insight into the identity-seeking aspect of the novel's characters (Peters, 2012, p.27)." Doubtless, this focus on identity-seeking during the childhood of the characters introduces the notion of parenting and home, as these two phenomena are the ones that are most connected and evocative of the dependency of the childhood stage.

Being a friendless person, Latimer made only one friendship with a young man called Charles Meunier. As said at the beginning, the whole story stands to be a call for having the readers' compassion. Therefore, everything mentions by Latimer are mentioned in a reason. Latimer narrates that Charles "was isolated, as I was ... I made timid advances towards him" (Eliot, p.7). Latimer describes his compassion for his friend despite the differences between them. The Dalai Lama (1990) explains that compassion is a necessity, not a great comfort and extravagant living but it is a request of human existence. So, Latimer is persuading the readers that they might find his suffering a false one, but that should not stop them from giving their sympathy and compassion.

Trying to be reasonable in his request for gaining sympathy, Latimer tries to clarify that the inner nature of the individual makes him eager to get sympathy. He declares: "But there is no tyranny more complete than that which a self-centered negative nature exercises over a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support" (Eliot, p.15). His eagerness for compassion and interest leads him to do a horrible thing by taking the advantages of his gift. He clarifies that he

“had never allowed my diseased condition to betray itself, or to drive me into any unusual speech or action ... I had forestalled some words which I knew he was going to utter” (Ibid, p.18). Latimer is careful in hiding his ability in reading people’s thoughts. However, his sickness for having interest makes him steal his brother’s words just to have the attention of people. This action stands to an identification of his miserable situation he is experiencing.

Latimer, the narrator, describes himself as a man of emotions rather than a practical man. The word ‘poetic’ has been used many times by Latimer in order to clarify that he is a sensible man. As said earlier, Latimer is gifted with clairvoyance. The crucial point in the story is Latimer’s vision of marrying Bertha (his brother’s fiancée) whom he never met. After meeting her, he promptly falls in love with her. The problem is that Bertha is the only person who cannot be read by Latimer. This unusual thing gives suspense to Latimer’s feelings towards Bertha.

As describes before, love stands as a form of compassion. Despite Latimer’s vision about marrying Bertha, he acts as if he is inferior to her. Bertha is someone unreachable to him. This clarifies his unconscious complex. According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experience even though we are unaware of these underlying influences. Latimer is suffering from a duality of feelings in his minds. This duality puts him in a melancholic situation that requires sympathy. He asks the readers for compassion and sympathy when he explains “are you unable to give me your sympathy, you who read this? Are you unable to imagine this double consciousness at work within me?” (Ibid, p.21).

Besides, In Freud’s theory, the unconscious mind is a mixture of emotions and ideas that stands to be a representation of our real awareness. These feelings and thoughts might be unacceptable or unbearable because it is controlled by chaos, pain, and conflict. This conflict causes Latimer a state of confusion or maybe a state of alienation. So, with the increasing of his suffering, his urgent need for compassion becomes obvious. He does not give the hint or implied requests, but he becomes so frank to ask sympathy from strangers reading his story.

After the death of Latimer’s brother, Latimer could manage to marry Bertha and to inherit all his brother’s possessions. Latimer exposes himself as an unreliable narrator through dealing with his father who has been affected tragically by the death of his son. Latimer states:

If it had not been for the softening influence of my compassion for him-- the first deep compassion I had ever felt. I should have been stung by the perception that my father transferred the inheritance of an eldest son to me with a mortified sense (Ibid, p.28).

Latimer stated that compassion should be provided as a necessity rather than a luxury. However, this is a perspective of unreliable narrator because of its contradiction. The reason of Latimer’s compassion for his

father is to achieve certain purposes. His father’s quest is to make Latimer fill his brother’s place, and that certainly included his marriage to Bertha.

After marrying Bertha, Latimer is still unable to read her thoughts. A few years after their marriage, Latimer gets the ability to read Bertha’s thoughts. He discovers that Bertha does not love him and she wishes death for him. His realization that Bertha’s feeling for him is characterized by hatred makes him miserable. Latimer describes the hardship of knowing the reality of Bertha’s feelings towards him. He explores that he “saw nothing in Bertha’s mind, except scorn for the look of overwhelming misery ... Fool, idiot, why don’t you kill yourself, then? that was her thought” (Ibid, p.35).

Unfortunately, he realizes that knowledge might sometimes be a disease rather than a benefit. He was acting normally with his faint relationship with his wife, but he never expected that hatred is the reason beyond this fainting. Latimer realizes that he is a subject of manipulating. He was only compensation for his brother or even a victim of the practices of his wife, who consider herself superior over him. His realization of losing love increases his need for sympathy and compassion because his only precious thing in his life faded away and his relationship to his wife is marked now by alienation. Unable to read Bertha’s thoughts, Latimer considers the importance of speculation against absolute knowledge. Eliot extends this understanding “so absolute is our soul’s need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life” (Ibid, p.29).

This keynote passage on the urge to speculate defends enquiry without prevision. For Eliot, the action of preserving a veil which is kept hidden is absolutely necessary to the human situation. But it is those speculative enquiries that would be undertaken if future knowledge were presently to become absolute that are so illuminating (Willis, 2005).

Usually, in the first-person narrative stories, the story ends where it begins, and this has a significant identification. Latimer ended up with the suffering that resulted from his psychological, social, and physical trauma. Therefore, the opening line of his story, “the time of my end approaches” (Eliot, p.2), summarizes the mental as well as the physical suffering of Latimer. Although one can infer from this argument that even though Latimer had different insecurities and confidence problems caused by his mental gift and his unconscious inferiority, he managed to maintain, to some level, healthy relationships with his surroundings. However, after losing his contact with other people, being friendless, and being manipulated by the women whom she loves, he becomes a miserable person who seems to be unlikable. Of course, this raises a question. Does Latimer deserve the compassion and sympathy he is asking for throughout the story? A question that might have many possible interpretations.



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## CONCLUSION

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The principal aim of this study is to use psychoanalytic theories of the major role of the concept of compassion in Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil*. The main argument is that the concept of compassion is significant in the reading of Eliot's work, particularly in *The Lifted Veil*.

The analysis of the previous work also shows how the characters in Eliot's work are typically marginalized members of society. By showing that, Eliot tried to describe the general atmosphere of the life in the Nineteenth-century societies and how it relates to the individuals of these societies. The importance of the study is that it provides a critical reading of Eliot's literature that highlights the author as universal in her emphasis on the individual's struggle.

Using the psychoanalytical theories of compassion such as Personality Theory in the analysis of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* provides a more comprehensive reading of Eliot's literary work that depicts the general atmosphere of the Nineteenth century. The importance of Freud's theories of the effects of childhood experiences in the lives of the adults lies in providing a better understanding of the concept of compassion in *The lifted veil*. Also, an awareness of the specific ways in which childhood experiences and trauma impact adult life is not only essential but also warrants further critical analysis in so far as the raising of children who grow into well-adjusted adults is concerned.

The analysis reveals the importance of Eliot's literature and its universality especially because it highlights the human predicament. Although this study concentrates on Nineteenth-century work, it can be used to describe the modern issues which are related to the concept of compassion such as alienation and isolation.

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