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Conversations 6.

George Eliot

1819-1880

George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann or Marian Evans) was born at Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, England, November 22, 1819. Limited by an extremely narrow religious upbringing, she managed to school herself in German, Italian, music and literature. When she was twenty-two she made new philosophic friends in Coventry and became a rationalist for the rest of her life. In 1844 she began to translate Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*. After her father died in 1849, she lived abroad for a while.

From 1851 to 1853 she served as assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*. This led to an acquaintance with Herbert Spencer, Carlyle, Francis Newman, and others. In 1851 she met the philosopher George Henry Lewes, who was separated from his wife. He and the future novelist traveled together on the continent. Later they settled in London, in a "singularly happy" union both regarded as a marriage. Their receptions were select and famous.

She published *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858. With *Adam Bede*, in the next year, the tremendous reputation of "George Eliot" was made. She brought out *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860 and *Silas Marner* in 1861. That year she spent a month in Florence preparing to write *Romola*. She was offered £10,000 for the copyright and *Cornhill Magazine* paid £7,000 for its serialization.

Between 1866 and 1879, she published *Felix Holt*, *The Spanish Gypsy* (a blank-verse play), *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* (a strong argument against anti-Semitism) and a book of essays, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Her work grew more and more intellectual. Like Tolstoy's later books, it was increasingly weighted with moral pleading.

In 1876 Lewes and George Eliot moved to Witley, near Godalm-

ing. Lewes died on November 28, 1878. "Here I and sorrow sit," she wrote in her journal. John W. Cross, a friend since 1869, helped to settle her affairs. In 1880—he forty and she sixty-one—she married him. That same year, on December 22, she died in London.

T*he Lifted Veil* is a fascinating story on several counts. About the middle of the nineteenth century, psychic phenomena of all kinds were so popular that they became half-serious parlor games. The spiritualist Fox sisters bewitched New York. A medium from Connecticut, D. D. Home, excited the foreign colony in Florence, where George Eliot studied Savonarola and his times in 1861. Ruskin asked Home to help him get in touch with the sixteenth-century painter Paolo Veronese.

Against this background, Latimer, the narrator in *The Lifted Veil*, might have been a fashionable hero of his time. He is both telepathic and clairvoyant—that is, he can receive and read other people's streams of consciousness, and he has accurate visions of future events and scenes not otherwise known to him. Both talents, verified or not, are included under the current term ESP or psi cognition.

Given these talents, plus a sensibility so acute that he can hardly bear the ordinary stresses of life, and Latimer becomes one of the most exasperating characters in English fiction. What does he do? Nothing—or as nearly nothing as any man can and still remain alive. No character in a Russian novel is so helplessly inert. He has a taste for poetry, perhaps some gift. How can he know unless he tries? He does not try. His qualifications as a mind reader and clairvoyant might have made him the most sought-after man in London. Instead, they remain his secret terror. He makes no use of them.

His one positive act is his marriage to Bertha. On this the story revolves. Cautiously enough, the author makes Latimer's psychic powers stop short of penetrating his wife's thoughts. There he draws a blank, or shows only the most ordinary awareness. We grant the

Notes from the artist: ". . . the profile of George Eliot is superimposed over a facsimile of the original manuscript of her novel *Adam Bede*."

ironic rightness of this. He is not the first or last husband whose insight fails to include his wife. But what if the author had not done this? What if she had allowed Latimer to see into his wife's mind? And what if their hostility to each other had become a duel—his psychic powers against her feminine penetration?

But we see at once that Latimer is not the man for it. If we allow for his limitations, as the author intended we should, he becomes the center of a solidly written story. His psychic gift works as a technical device. It allows the author to foretell each crisis in his life, even the last, but with one exception: Bertha's plot against him. This is revealed, almost by chance, in the doctor's experiment. Only then does Latimer—and the reader—understand the depth of her hatred.



George Eliot

Page of the MS. of "Adam Bede"

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Latimer tell the story of his experiences only when he is close to death?
2. What does Latimer mean when he attributes his solitude to “[the poet’s sensibility without his voice](#)”?
3. Why is Charles Meunier the only friend Latimer ever has? When Meunier visits him near the end of the story, why does Latimer decide not to confide in Meunier about his condition?
4. Why do Latimer’s insights into the future and the inner lives of people around him bring him only misery?
5. For Latimer, why is Bertha “[the only exception, among all the human beings about me, to my unhappy gift of insight](#)”?
6. Why does Latimer continue to pursue Bertha despite his prevision of their hellish future together?
7. Why is Latimer able to feel pity and affection for his father only after Alfred’s death? Why is it that on the evening of his father’s death “[the veil which had shrouded Bertha’s soul . . . was first withdrawn](#)”?
8. Why does Latimer say, “[Brevity is justified at once to those who readily understand, and to those who will never understand](#)”?
9. Why does Eliot have Mrs. Archer brought back from death to reveal Bertha’s plan to poison Latimer?
 10. What does Latimer mean by “[the one Unknown Presence](#)” that he continually lives with?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Does Latimer bear any responsibility for making Bertha what she is?
2. Is it necessary to be somewhat deluded about other people and blind to their inner lives in order to care for them?
3. Is Latimer correct, that our souls have a “need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life”?
4. If we can only understand the meaning of the words we use to “epitomise” the lives of others if “paid for with our lifeblood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves,” does this mean we can only understand other lives by experiencing them? Is this possible without the kind of clairvoyance that Latimer has?