

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1991

The Painful Challenge of George Eliot's Epigraph

Mary Carroll

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Carroll, Mary, "The Painful Challenge of George Eliot's Epigraph" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 154.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/154>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns
To energy of human fellowship;
No powers beyond the growing heritage
That makes completer manhood.*

THE PAINFUL CHALLENGE OF GEORGE ELIOT'S EPIGRAPH

by Mary Carroll

Through her altruistic epigraph to a painful story, George Eliot suggests that the journey to greater human fellowship often requires a passage through suffering. In *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot explores the form of pain that shackles sado-masochistic relationships, and the roots of that pain - buried in the misperception that punishment is deserved. This paper will explore Latimer's attempt to change by moving through his masochistic stance into the sadism which has bound him.

The masochistic need for the sadist is captured by Eliot when she has Latimer moan:

While the heart beats, bruise it - it is your only opportunity; while the eye can still turn towards you with moist timid entreaty, freeze it with an icy unanswering gaze; while the ear, that delicate messenger to the inmost sanctuary of the soul, can still take in the tones of kindness, put it off with hard civility, or sneering compliment...

Although Latimer's lament rings with self-pity, it also illustrates the tightness of the trap. Latimer's response at the onset of his heart attack represents a last resistance to change:

I make great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. I thirsted for the unknown: the thirst is gone. O God, let me stay with the known, and be weary of it: I am content. (2)

Latimer's cry for help is understandable, but surges through entrenched psychological or social structures usually have to be finalized in solitude. The courage to engage in the solitary completion of the journey arises from earlier accomplishments and future promises.

Eliot presents a bleak picture of Latimer's early experiences and his response to them. As a result of his eye complaint, his mother kept him "on her knee from morning to night" (4). It is doubtful that an eye complaint would require such a symbiotic hold, but assertable that it would have a crippling effect on a child's growth. And it is in the crippling of the drive toward self-sufficiency that sadism finds its ready target. Bereft of his mother's knee and left with a father described as: "one of those people who are always like themselves from day to day, who are uninfluenced by the weather, and neither know melancholy nor high spirits" Latimer is helplessly alone (5).

Latimer's development is also blocked vocationally: "hungry for human deeds and human emotions," he is forced to study mechanical science (7). The murderous impulses emanating from such an environment and their self-destructive acceptance by the victim is captured by Eliot when she has Latimer say: "my nature was of the sensitive, unpractical order, and ... it grew up in an uncongenial medium which could never foster it into happy healthy development" (8).

Away from the oppression of his home environment, Latimer forms a friendship with the orphan science student, Meunier. It is a friendship that arises from mutual isolation and develops into a spansion of poetry and science. Strengthened by his friendship with Meunier, Latimer falls ill:

This happier life at Geneva was put an end to by a severe illness, which is partly a blank to me, partly a time of dimly-remembered suffering, with the presence of my father by my bed from time to time. (10)

Latimer's prevision of Prague, as he recovers from his illness, may be taken as a metaphor for his life: "a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course ..." (11) He emerges from the dream full of creative energy having focused on the rainbow light rather than the bleakness of the scene and recognizing that he has changed: "Was it that my illness had wrought some happy change in my organization - given a firm tension to my nerves - carried off some dull obstruction?"(13).

Latimer has glimpsed a way out of his masochistic helplessness, but in order to turn his life around, he will have to understand his past from all sides. He will have to go into the sadism, if he is to leave his masochism. Latimer's journey begins with his response to his prevision of Bertha Grant: "I felt a painful sensation as if a sharp wind were cutting me" (16). Upon meeting Bertha he faints at the prospect of the task ahead of him, but he continues.

Eliot gives Latimer clairvoyant abilities in order to demonstrate his mesmeric attraction to Bertha, and to show in conscious form the unconscious bond of sado-masochistic relationships. Latimer focuses on the negative as he enters the minds of others, and his pain increases as he proceeds from acquaintances to family members. He is blocked, however, from entering the mind of the woman he will marry. Externally, he perceives Bertha as:

... keen, sarcastic, unimaginative, prematurely cynical, remaining critical and unmoved in the most impressive scenes, inclined to dissect all my favourite poems, and especially contemptuous towards the German lyrics which were my pet literature at that time. (22)

Yet he describes each day in her presence as “delicious torment,” thus capturing the sexual energy that swirls through sadism and binds the masochist (24). Eliot recognizes the nature of control in such relationships when she has Latimer state: “there is no tyranny more complete than that which a self-centred negative nature exercises over a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support” (22)

Latimer’s conscious perception of his bind clears as he views the painting of Lucrezia Borgia: “I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of the effects” (28). He marries Bertha stating that: “The fear of poison is feeble against the sense of thirst” (30).

The marriage follows a surge toward maturity. Prior to Alfred’s death, Latimer had realized “my selfishness was even stronger than his - it was only a suffering selfishness instead of an enjoying one” (37). And he is able to empathize with his father’s feelings of loss at the death of Alfred.

Strengthened by his maturity, Latimer lifts the veil and penetrates Bertha’s mind after the death of his father. His knowledge renders Bertha helpless, and Latimer grows increasingly sadistic toward her. He is not, however, able to leave the relationship:

Towards my own destiny I had become entirely passive; for my one ardent desire had spent itself, and impulse no longer predominated over knowledge. For this reason I never thought of taking any steps towards a complete separation, which would have made our alienation evident to the world. (51)

A public proclamation means there is no turning back, but it cannot be made until the essence of the tie is penetrated.

Bertha hopes Latimer will commit suicide, but that is not in his nature even though he is preoccupied with thoughts of his own death. As Latimer withdraws, Bertha shifts her focus to Mrs. Archer, a servant whose name implies a masochistic orientation. Latimer also obtains a new partner. Meunier, the scientific man, arrives to visit Latimer, ends up caring for Mrs. Archer, and saving Latimer from Bertha's poison. Latimer penetrates Bertha's essence as she refuses to leave the sick room of her dying servant:

The features at that moment seemed so preternaturally sharp, the eyes were so hard and eager - she looked like a cruel immortal, finding her spiritual feast in the agonies of a dying race. For across those hard features there came something like a flash when the last hour had been breathed out, and we all felt that the dark veil had completely fallen. (63)

Death lies under the veil. The spiritual death of sado-masochistic relationships, and the death of the old that must be faced in change. The motivation of the sadist, unperceived by the masochist, is expressed by Mrs. Archer as she reveals Bertha's scheme:

You meant to poison your husband ... the poison is in the black cabinet ... I got it for you ... you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back, to make me disgusting ... because you were jealous ... (65)

Eliot ends her story with Latimer and Bertha poles apart, but remaining as halves of a whole until Latimer dies of a heart attack.

A relationship between the blossoming of George Eliot's writing career and the story of *The Lifted Veil* has been clearly established chronologically, but dimly understood metaphorically. Perhaps an analogy can be drawn between Eliot's success with *Adam Bede* followed by her writing detour in *The Lifted Veil*, and Latimer's journey into pain after seeing the rainbow in Prague. The difference, however, lies in George Eliot's survival and triumph.

Bibliography

1. George Eliot. *The Lifted Veil*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p.3. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and page numbers are in my paper.