

**EXPANDING ELIOT'S REALIST AESTHETIC: EMBODIED REALIST STRATEGIES**

**IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE LIFTED VEIL***

by

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submitted by Mary-Anne Shonoda in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
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## Abstract

Scholarship on George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859), initially interpreted this novella as an anomaly in her realist oeuvre. More recently, scholars have responded to the text through critical frameworks that emphasise the novella's realist aspects, particularly its engagement with Victorian science. In this thesis, I draw on research from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistic studies to show Eliot uses what I call, *embodied realist strategies*—strategies that require readers to make sense of textual information by drawing on stored, embodied experience—to reveal new ways that the novella aligns with Eliot's realist aesthetic and ultimately expands our understanding of it. In Chapter One, I situate *The Lifted Veil* within key visual and critical contexts and outline the three embodied realist strategies that I use to analyse her novella: multimodal integration, the synaesthetic sensorium and sympathy-via-sensory-analogue. Chapter Two applies these embodied realist strategies to analyse *The Lifted Veil*, revealing how the novella renders the extraordinary experiences of its protagonist palpably real and intimately knowable. In doing so, I demonstrate how Eliot grounds her narrative in ordinary, embodied human experience and ultimately provides a means for readers to legitimately sympathise with the novella's protagonist. This approach thus responds to claims that Eliot's ethics of sympathy lead only to projection or disguised egoism. Finally, in the coda to this thesis, I briefly outline how embodied realist strategies may be productively applied to novels already recognised as realist, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to explain realist effects not yet considered by Eliot scholarship.

## **Lay Summary**

George Eliot is a well-known writer of Victorian, realist novels. Her novella, *The Lifted Veil* (1859), was initially read as being the exception to her realistic style of writing. In this thesis, I use research and ideas from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to show how *The Lifted Veil* relies on thought processes that we regularly use to make sense of the real world, to give readers the sense that the story they are reading is vivid and realistic. In doing so, I expand our understanding of Eliot's writing style and show that there are new, unexplored ways that her realistic novels could be considered realistic.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Mary-Anne Shonoda.

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## Chapter One: Eliot's *Lifted Veil* in Context

Although George Eliot is often described as a central figure in Victorian literary realism, her 1859 novella, *The Lifted Veil*, has prompted mixed, critical responses. Early scholarship tended to read the work as an anomalous exception to her realist oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with Beryl Gray's widely cited, "Pseudoscience and George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil'" (1982), scholars have increasingly responded to the text through frameworks that emphasise its realist aspects, particularly its engagement with Victorian science. In the next chapter, I look closely at readings by Helen Small, Sally Shuttleworth, Martin Raitiere and others who have extended this line of scholarship by drawing on various contemporary physiological and psychological sciences. In this introductory chapter, I situate the novella within key visual and critical contexts, touching briefly on realism as it relates to Victorian visuality. Drawing on research from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistic studies to extend existing research on Eliot and embodiment, I show how the novella reflects the celebration of the commonplace and ordinary that is central to Eliot's realist aesthetic. I outline key concepts in cognitive psychology such as embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor and sensory imagery before providing an overview of what I call *embodied realist strategies*: strategies that require readers to make sense of textual information by drawing on stored, embodied experience to instantiate or interpret events in realist storyworlds.<sup>2</sup> These strategies are discussed to demonstrate how they can expand our

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Albrecht's article, "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's *Lifted Veil*"; Kate Flint, "Blood, Bodies and *The Lifted Veil*"; and Whitney Helms, "Aesthetics, Artistry and Gothicism: George Eliot and *The Lifted Veil*."

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the term *storyworlds* as it is commonly used in narratology and possible worlds theory, and follow the definition provided by David Herman in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005): "mental models of who did what and to whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters [cognitively] relocate as they work to comprehend a narrative" (Herman *Narrative* 570).

understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic and will then be applied to an analysis of Eliot's *Lifted Veil* in Chapter Two. Finally, in the coda to this thesis, I briefly outline how embodied realist strategies may be productively applied to novels already recognised as realist, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to explain realist effects not yet considered by Eliot scholarship.

### **Victorian Visual Culture and the Dominance of the Visual**

The act of seeing—including the cultural, physiological and subjective dimensions involved in such acts – was of ongoing and ubiquitous interest to the Victorians (Flint 2). Inventions such as photography and the illustrated press led to an increase in access to visual information and a social proliferation of images that in turn increased opportunities for different types of spectatorship (Flint 3). Mass production led to the visual circulation of idealised images, increasing desire for them, which in turn led to an increase in capitalist tendencies (Richards 16). Further, while colonisation and expeditions expanded the sense of the visible geographically, inventions, such as the stereoscope, kaleidoscope and magic lantern provided new ways of looking at domestic environments (Flint 4). These objects enabled a visual experience without a physical, tactile referent, leading to the generation of images that were more “spectral” (Armstrong 143). Such images are representative of a more widespread, Victorian trend recognised by Jonathan Crary in his influential study, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*.

Crary describes a phenomenon that he calls “the autonomisation of sight” (Crary 16), a process by which visual experience— as a result of new technologies and new ways of perceiving—becomes separated from the observer's body and tactile reality, and consequently acquires “an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability” (Crary 14). This new mobility enables vision to subjugate information from the other senses to produce abstracted, distorted images of

reality. Vision thus comes to dominate both the Victorian sensorium and spectator-obsessed Victorian culture.

At the same time, the dominance and accuracy of visual data was not entirely unchallenged within Victorian culture. Although some Victorian sciences such as phrenology (analyses people's intellectual, emotional and moral capacities by examining the shape of their skulls) and physiognomy (reading facial expressions for character) were heavily reliant on visual information, and Victorian empirical sciences often provided models for Victorian ways of seeing (Flint 8), many scientists expressed reservations about the potential of visual information to illuminate fully the mysteries in our scientific understanding and recognised that science often made claims that could not be proved by observation. The physicist John Tyndall, for example, in "Early Thoughts" claimed "physics is wide but it has its limits from which we look with vacant gaze into the beyond" (Tyndall 72). At the same time, the emphasis on precise recording of detail that is at the heart of Victorian scientific method, has been recognised as characteristic of the Victorian literary style of realism (Flint 19).

Several commentators have discussed the centrality of sight to realist writing.<sup>3</sup> Although space limitations do not allow for a full discussion of this idea across Victorian realist fiction generally, this idea will be considered more thoroughly in Chapter Two where I discuss features of classical realism. In this chapter I will limit discussion to scholarship specifically on George Eliot's treatment of the visual in her fictional work.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Ian Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, (1957) which discusses the importance of the visual in enabling the construction of material realities central to classical realist texts; Peter Books, *Realist Vision*, which argues that the accumulation of visual detail is near definitional of the realist novel and essential to the way realist novels turn real world problems into spectacles that can then be mastered by readers; and Audrey Jaffe, *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real*, where visuality is important for the construction of realist fantasy.

## Visuality in George Eliot's Work

Of all Eliot's novels, the two that have received the most critical attention for their focus on visual perception and optical imagery are *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*. J Hillis Miller in his influential essay, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" (1992), demonstrates how Eliot attempts to represent the realist vision she outlines in her essay "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), using a range of optical metaphors to capture the subjective life of individuals, relations between individuals sharing the same social environment, and the relation of characters to the social whole (Miller 132). Eliot's characters, notes Miller, are represented in rich psychological specificity and via these metaphors, Eliot enables readers to respond to these characters as highly specific yet exhibiting behaviour that demonstrates generalisable laws (Miller 127). Similarly interested in visual metaphors, this time from microscopy, Mark Wormald demonstrates how the structure and texture of *Middlemarch* reflect vocabulary and ideas first discussed in G.H. Lewes's "Only A Pond!" – an account of microscopical investigations of water creatures conducted by Lewes in the mid to late 1850s (Wormald 502). Wormald, like Miller, then uses these metaphors to analyse social relationships in *Middlemarch* (Wormald 503). Critical scholarship on visual modes in *Adam Bede* is less concerned with representing social relationships than providing commentary on the functions and limitations of art and writing. The famous chapter 17 has been frequently described as theoretically outlining Eliot's realist aesthetic and capturing the key tenets of British realism more generally (see for example Byerly 106; Griffin 475; Jaffe 7) as it draws out parallels between realist writing and Dutch painting. Interestingly, Eliot's characters who construct interpretations—whether of other characters or events—based primarily on visual perceptions often draw conclusions that are inaccurate or limited, as recognised by Alison Byerly in her discussion of Eliot's hierarchy of the arts (Byerly

107). A tension thus emerges in Eliot's fiction: when her novels metafictionally discuss writing, Eliot insightfully draws on visual analogues of painting, drawing and the language of pictures to illuminate her aesthetic, yet her most superficial characters—Rosamund Vincy, Hetty Sorrell, Gwendolen Harleth—are presented as primarily concerned with their visual appearance and how others perceive them (Byerly 106). One way of addressing this paradox is to recognise, as Christina Griffin does, that Eliot's narrators—including the intrusive narrator of *Adam Bede*—are not merely describing visual scenes to readers, but also inviting them to engage *imaginatively* with the scene rather than simply observing it. Further, intrusive narrators in Eliot's early fiction (including *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*) are characters in the main narrative and provide their perspective through an embodied viewpoint (one that shares the same environment in sensory experience of the described characters) to ground sympathy in sensory feeling (Griffin 476). Existing scholarship on Eliot and visuality thus recognises her nuanced views on the value of visual information as well as the possibility of embodiment as a solution to visual abstraction in her fiction. This thesis will extend the parameters of this scholarship by demonstrating how in *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot similarly grounds sympathy in an embodied perspective and that she does this through what I call *embodied realist* strategies: strategies that rely on stored, embodied experience and everyday meaning-making processes dependent on embodied cognition. I thus approach the question of embodied sympathy from a cognitive psychological perspective and consequently show how such an approach can productively expand our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic. First however, it will be necessary to outline what this realist aesthetic is, starting with Eliot's own views on it.

## **Eliot's Realist Aesthetic**

In a famous and much-quoted passage from her essay "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot describes art as "the nearest thing to life; a mode of amplifying our experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond our personal lot" (Natural 271). Yet to do so effectively, she argues, the artist must teach us to "feel not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness" (Eliot Natural 271). To represent these ordinary people accurately, Eliot insists that artists draw from direct experience rather than look to literature for models (Eliot Natural 270). To this end, Eliot suggests artists first acquire "real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives" (Eliot Natural 272) through devoting themselves to

studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry, -the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other. (Eliot *Essays* 273)

Only after they have familiarised themselves with such true knowledge of the experiences of others can artists attempt to accurately represent people from classes distinctly different from their own. Eliot holds up the work of sociologist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl as a model to be imitated by English artists (Eliot Natural 273). In writing about the peasantry for example, Eliot, paraphrasing Riehl, notes that peasants value traditional custom over individual feeling:

In the cultivated world, each individual has his style of speaking and writing. But among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province, that has its style; namely, its dialect,

its phraseology, its proverbs and its songs, which belong alike to the entire body of the people. This provincial style of the peasant is again, like his *physique*, a remnant of history to which he clings with the utmost tenacity. (Eliot *Essays* 274)

Yet, despite the predominance of collective values and practices in German peasant life, Riehl notes that German writers commit the same fallacy as English novelists: that “when our writers of village stories transferred their own emotional life to the peasant, they obliterated what is precisely his most predominant characteristic, namely, that with him general custom holds the place of individual feeling” (Eliot *Natural* 280). It is to avoid prompting sympathy for such “false objects,” which directs it away from representations that capture the reality of others’ lives that Eliot insists on detailed, direct observation and “immediate intercourse with the people” (Eliot *Natural* 286), as modelled by Riehl, who for years wandered among the people to accumulate his observations.<sup>4</sup> As noted by Christina Griffin, there is clearly an embodied element to Eliot’s realism, emphasised in the same essay through Eliot’s discussion of a group of haymakers whose image becomes less idyllic but more rustic and accurate the closer—and thus more physically proximate—the observer gets to the group (Griffin 481). I will return to discuss the centrality of embodiment to Eliot’s realist aesthetic in the next section on Eliot and embodiment.

Having established the importance of direct observation and knowledge to accurate representation, I now consider other aspects central to Eliot’s aesthetics: the valuing of the commonplace and ordinary, often by confronting characters with their own commonality and limitations (Henry and Levine 57). Moments of disenchantment and a recognition of their own

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<sup>4</sup> My main purpose in quoting Eliot here, is to show that the importance of particularity and the need for interaction with real people are, in her own words, crucial to her aesthetic. There remain, however, questions around the validity of these representations given the possibility of a cultural outsider claiming “direct observation” of a group’s cultural practices and norms while distorting them through the observer’s own cultural lens.

ordinariness are key stages in the development of Eliot's protagonists, grounding them in their social place and reaffirming Eliot's commitment to representing things as they are and not as they ought to be. In *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot uses embodied realist strategies to enable readers to sympathise with her clairvoyant protagonist Latimer and increasingly reveal his ordinariness to both readers and to Latimer himself. Before I outline these strategies and the research from cognitive literary studies that underlies them, I provide an overview of current criticism on embodiment in Eliot's fiction.

### **Embodiment in Eliot Scholarship**

Several scholars have already discussed how Eliot's work relies on embodiment to celebrate the ordinary. Drawing on G.H. Lewes's concept of double-aspect monism—the idea that mind and body are different aspects of the same thing (*Problems of Life and Mind* 1)—Hannah Fogarty demonstrates how the notion of embodied consciousness diffused across the body enables Silas Marner to engage in everyday, habitual actions with objects that become mutually enlivening and transformative (Fogarty 875), creating an alternative form of community. In contrast to Fogarty's positive approach to embodiment, Pearl Brilmyer notes that in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot's last published work, embodiment—referring to characters having consciousness encased by material bodies—provides both limits and potential, and renders humans and nonhuman organisms equal through their limited bodies (Brilmyer 88). In this text, Eliot de-centres human beings to celebrate the commonalities and limits across human and nonhuman organisms. Finally, in “George Eliot's Feuerbach: Senses, Sympathy, Omniscience and Secularism,” Christina Griffin demonstrates how Eliot relies on embodiment to enable authentic sympathy between narrator and characters. As mentioned above, the narrators of Eliot's early novels are typically embodied—where embodied refers to narrators having the same



level of corporeality as other characters (Griffin 476) – and situated on the same plane as her characters, to show fellow-feeling is always grounded in sensory feeling. Further, Griffin shows how this sensory-grounded sympathy is necessarily Feuerbachian, being deeply rooted in the human physiology of self-aware bodies and yet shared across individuals and therefore social (Griffin 476). Through references to key scenes from *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, Griffin demonstrates the centrality of the body and the senses to sympathy, enabling narrators to avoid abstract generalisations by constructing interpretations of events through a “sensorium shared by [the narrator’s] fellow characters” (Griffin 490).

In this thesis, I contribute to existing research on embodiment in Eliot’s fiction by drawing on research from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to show how Eliot relies on everyday, embodied cognitive processes to enable readers to phenomenologically experience the verisimilar effects of her writing. Further, in engaging readers in embodied realist strategies, which involve multisensory engagement, Eliot counters the Victorian “autonomisation of sight” recognised by Jonathan Cray. The abstracted visual experience that is characteristic of the dominant, reductive, disembodied visual images that Cray refers to are problematic for Eliot because, for her, realism is not only accuracy in representation but must reveal to us our commonality and limitations (Henry and Levine 57). Abstracted vision, through images constructed independently of the other senses, denies the embodied human experience that can legitimately serve as a basis for our common human experience and limitations.

### **Embodiment in Eliot’s Fiction: A Cognitive Approach**

In the 1980s, a new interdisciplinary strand of literary analysis began to emerge with scholars beginning to incorporate knowledge from the fields of neuroscience and cognition to illuminate readings of texts or aspects of the reading process (Richardson 1). Within this field of cognitive

approaches to literature, Alan Richardson identifies five main sub-fields: cognitive rhetoric and conceptual blending; cognitive poetics; cognitive narratology; cognitive materialism and historicism; and cognitive aesthetics and reception (Richardson 2). Each sub-field has its own way of approaching the questions below:

- 1) How does it account for “literariness” or what makes literature, literature?
- 2) To what extent do empirical data or methods figure in their account of reading?
- 3) What position is taken towards embodied, materialist and computational accounts of the mind? (Richardson 2)

Further, each of these sub-fields combines concepts from an established theoretical field (for example narratology or historicism) with cognitive science to shed light on longstanding questions within that field. Cognitive poetics, for example, combines research from cognitive science on the processing of language with existing literary scholarship on how readers experience poetry (poetics) to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of readers’ experiences of poems (Starr *Cognitive Literary* 417). This thesis, following the ground-breaking work of Elaine Auyoung on the phenomenological effects of reading realist fiction, will predominantly draw on research from cognitive psychology (the study of mental processes involved in perception, attention, language and memory) [APA] and cognitive linguistics (an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language and cognition that holds that language reflects general aspects of cognition and that it is best studied in its context of use) [Evans] to demonstrate how Eliot relies on stored embodied knowledge and everyday, embodied, cognitive processes to create the realist effects of *The Lifted Veil*, and ultimately expand our understanding of her realist aesthetic. I identify three *embodied realist strategies* at work in her novella and will draw specifically on

three concepts from cognitive psychology to substantiate my claims: embodied cognition, the processing of sensory imagery and the use of metacognitive cues to instantiate storyworlds.

Before I define embodied realist strategies, a clarification on the use of the term embodied realism is required. For influential cognitive linguists Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, thought is always embodied, meaning it is always structured by how our body experiences being in and interacting with the world (*Philosophy in the Flesh* 3). As a result, there is no ultimate separation of mind and body and we are always interacting with the world through our embodied experiences (Lakoff and Johnson *Why* 249). Consequently, for Lakoff and Johnson, meaning, experience and thought are located in the ongoing interactions between embodied organism and environment. They call this view *embodied realism*.<sup>5</sup>I have chosen the term *embodied realist* strategies to indicate that the strategies I discuss rely on this background understanding and interdependence of mind, body and environment.

### **Embodied Realist Strategies**

I identify three distinct embodied realist strategies in *The Lifted Veil*. The first strategy, “multi-modal integration” requires readers and protagonists to integrate information from multiple sense modalities to enable an aesthetic understanding of events to emerge. It relies particularly on research from cognitive psychology on the processing of sensory imagery and everyday, embodied gestures. I also use this research to show that in Eliot’s novella, experiencing the aesthetic dimensions of lived experience relies on embodied, multisensory

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<sup>5</sup> *Embodied realism* has several meanings in cognitive literary studies. Apart from this definition, Kamilla Walker uses the term to describe her theory of literary realism which recognises language that activates reading awareness on two-levels: the first level -which she calls ‘bio(pre)perceptual’- involves a tacit acknowledgment to a bodily response to emotional stimuli; the second—‘narrative-reflective’—refers to establishing the point of convergence between the imagined and real emotional scenarios.

engagement with the world. Further, as in the real-world where integrating information from multiple senses produces interpretations more likely to align with external reality, Latimer's integration of multi-sensory information suggests his interpretation is more in line with reality and establishes a link between the aesthetic and the real.

For Latimer, sensory events are typically experienced through at least two sensory modalities or what I call the *synaesthetic sensorium*. Both Meegan Kennedy and Derek Woods briefly mention the presence of synaesthesia in Latimer's sensory descriptions. However, neither scholar explores this aspect of *Lifted Veil* in detail. In this thesis, I again draw on findings from cognitive psychology to show how the activation and processing of sensory imagery across two modalities can enable vivid, phenomenological effects that render the storyworld intimately knowable and life-like. At the same time, conceptualising one sensory experience in terms of another not only activates traces of embodied experience stored in memory, but allows readers to connect with Latimer's unique experience through their common, embodied human experience. The *synaesthetic sensorium* thus reverses the abstraction process characteristic of Victorian construction of the senses, grounding the reading experience in concrete, embodied human experience.

*Sympathy-via-sensory-analogue* is the final embodied realist strategy Eliot deploys in *Lifted Veil*. It involves Latimer explaining his unusual telepathic experience via commonplace embodied experiences: "Are you unable to give me your sympathy—you who read this? Are you unable to imagine the double consciousness at work within me, flowing on like two parallel streams that never mingle their waters?" (Eliot *Lifted* 21). By deploying a commonplace visual image to communicate his experience of double-consciousness, Latimer enables readers to sympathise via imagined, but embodied visual experience. Here we see that Eliot is not critical

of all visual experience, but visual experience that is reductive or abstracted, and that as in her earlier novels, visual experiences that involve the reader actively engaging with the scene via imagining it, rely on embodied experience that in turn grounds the narrative in shared, common experience.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how *The Lifted Veil* makes use of narrative strategies traditionally considered realist as well as examining its deployment of embodied realist strategies. I ultimately argue that embodied realist strategies not only lead to an expansion of our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic, but as a result of sympathy-via-sensory-analogue, enable us to address some of the criticisms levelled at Eliot's ethics of sympathy as it is represented in this novella.

## Chapter Two: Embodied Realist Strategies and the Expansion of Eliot's Realist Aesthetic in *The Lifted Veil*

As mentioned in the introduction, recent scholarship on Eliot's *Lifted Veil* has reframed the novella's initially marginalised relationship to her more conventionally realist novels. Building on the brief, visuality-related discussion of realism in the previous chapter, I now consider the diverse range of literary approaches scholars have used to highlight the ways *The Lifted Veil* thematically, scientifically, and formally adheres to the conventions and functions of realist writing. I contribute to this body of scholarship by first providing an overview of theories of realism and then discussing the overlooked ways *The Lifted Veil* meets the requirements of classical realist writing. *The Lifted Veil* also expands our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic beyond classical realism, and I show how the novella achieves this extension by engaging readers in the *embodied realist strategies* outlined in the previous chapter. Using the concepts from cognitive psychology discussed in the introduction—embodied cognition, the processing of sensory imagery and metacognitive cues—I show how *The Lifted Veil* renders the extraordinary experiences of its protagonist palpably real and intimately knowable. In doing so, I demonstrate how Eliot responds to the “autonomisation of sight” identified by Crary, and ultimately grounds her narrative in ordinary, embodied human experience. Finally, Eliot's ethics of sympathy has been criticised as disguised egoism, voyeurism (Redfield 137) and sadism (Cvetkovich 143). In focusing on the embodied experiences at the core of embodied reading strategies, I ultimately show how readers come to intimately and legitimately sympathise with Latimer via a common base of embodied experience.

## Classical Realism: The Critical Tradition

The critical tradition around realist writing is vast. Early scholars such as Ian Watt, Catherine Belsey and Colin MacCabe tended to focus on the formal features of the genre and the historical conditions that led to the rise of the realist novel.<sup>6</sup> Some of the commonly agreed upon formal features include: the evocation of concrete, material realities; linearity of space and time; unique characters with depth or interiority, and a thematic interest in disillusionment (Jaffe 5; Belsey; MacCabe). Building on the centrality of material realities in realist writing, Roman Jakobson's account of realism emphasises the importance of metonymy in representing ordinary, non-symbolic realities (Jakobson). Similarly, Roland Barthes's discussion of the descriptive detail—details that serve no narrative or character function (Barthes 146)—highlights the aesthetic, verisimilar effect of employing seemingly insignificant details to construct realistic storyworlds. Much later, Peter Brooks in *Realist Vision* approaches the hard materiality of realist writing by looking at how “things” are central to several aspects of the realist vision. Characterisation, he argues, is revealed through the “things people use and acquire to define themselves” (Brooks 14). Further, Brooks shares Barthes's respect for the non-signifying detail and asserts that attending to “accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be considered nearly definitional of the realist novel” (Brooks 16). Consequently, realist writing for Brooks is necessarily highly visual: it is concerned with registering appearances, the “thereness of the world” (Brooks 16), and is a genre in which first impressions are critical currency (Brooks

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<sup>6</sup> See Ian Watt *Rise of the Novel*, (1957); Catherine Belsey *Critical Practice*, (1980) and Colin MacCabe, *Tracking the Signifier*, (1985).

3). This focus on the visual helps explain the rise of realism in the visuality-preoccupied Victorian culture that I discussed in Chapter One. It also supports Brooks's view of the realist novel as affording readers new pleasures by translating real world problems and experiences into spectacles that in turn enable mastery through playing with scale models (Brooks 2).

Another strand of realist scholarship assumes realist fiction bears some relationship to external reality (Byerly 2; Levine *Realistic* 6). George Levine, in *Realistic Imagination*, states realist writing “always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some nonverbal truth out there” (Levine 6). More recently, New Historicist, Thing theory and surface reading approaches continue this line of thinking, their aim being to get at the real behind realism (Jaffe 2). Yet even this view of realism has been contested in scholarship on realist writing. In her study of realism in Victorian novels, Alison Byerly recognises that although realist writing has traditionally been read to exclude artifice, many Victorian realist novels refer to the arts, drawing attention to the novel's fictionality and threatening to break the text's illusion of unmediated reality.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, these references to art create a sphere that is distinct from the underlying “reality” layer of the storyworld, resulting in a storyworld with reality-like complexity (Byerly 6). This reality-like complexity and verisimilar effects are ultimately what Byerly sees as constituting the genre. Audrey Jaffe and Elaine Auyoung share this view of realism and it is this view of realist writing—that it is predominantly characterised by its verisimilar effects and not its relationship to any external reality—that will serve as the working definition of realist writing for this thesis.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these novels include Thomas Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848); Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Vilette* (1853); George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876); and Thomas Hardy *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).



Audrey Jaffe's ground-breaking work on realism shifts the focus away from the realist text's relationship to external reality and redefines realism as the desire for the real—and thus a fantasy—made possible through representations that produce realist effects (Jaffe 12). Her study rereads many of the conventions of classic realism and demonstrates how their realist effects rely on the creation and fulfilment of readers' characters' and even novels' desire for the real (Jaffe 3-6). This interest in how realist effects are achieved situates Jaffe in the same camp as Elaine Auyoung, a literary scholar who applies research from cognitive psychology to show how realist writers use textual cues to facilitate retrieval of embodied knowledge that enables readers to experience realist storyworlds as "intimately knowable and palpably real" (Auyoung 19). To develop my own realist reading of Eliot's *Lifted Veil*, which like Byerly, Jaffe and Auyoung considers verisimilar effects to be constitutive of realist writing, I similarly draw on research from cognitive psychology. I show how Eliot capitalises on techniques that activate readers' stored embodied experience to render Latimer's supernatural experiences palpably real and accessible to them, ultimately expanding our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic. First however, it is important to review existing scholarship on realism and *The Lifted Veil*.

### **Scholarship on *The Lifted Veil* and Realism**

When Eliot's *Lifted Veil* was published in 1859, it received mixed responses (Small xi). Some – including Eliot acolyte Edith Simcox—responded with bewilderment. "I was put out by things I didn't quite know what to do with" (Eliot *Letters* 220), Simcox commented in a letter to Eliot. John Blackwood, the novella's publisher, expressed resistance to the blood transfusion scene, though he also acknowledged the story as "striking," "full of thought and most beautifully written" (Eliot *Letters* 67). Early critical scholarship on the novella tended to read it as an anomaly in Eliot's otherwise conventionally realist oeuvre and typically neglected it (Small xi).

That is until 1982 when Beryl Gray's paradigm-shifting essay revealed connections between Latimer's experience of aural telepathy (Latimer's overhearing of others' thoughts) and prevision (vision of scenes from later in his life) that were said to be characteristic of mesmerism (at the time a contested science). Kate Flint, in her reading of the novella in *Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, recognises the blood transfusion scene's reliance on contemporary Victorian science as well as its interrogation of the limits of positivism (Flint 96, 97). Several scholars, including Helen Small, Sally Shuttleworth and Martin Raitiere have recognised *Lifted Veil's* engagement with contemporary neurological theories. Although Eliot in her journals uses the term "double consciousness" to refer to the ordinary human experience of being unable to fully direct one's conscious mind to what is being presently observed, simultaneously experiencing awareness of that lack of full immersion (Eliot *Journals* 336), Small and Shuttleworth canvas the many meanings of "double consciousness" across Victorian scientific contexts, including animal magnetism, mesmerism and Holland's theory of brain injury. In contrast, Martin Raitiere's article "Did the Novelist Anticipate the Neurologist? The Enigma of George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*" reads the novella as the first description of complex partial seizure, and focuses predominantly on the text's response to Victorian theories of epilepsy (Raitiere 144-170). The best scholarship on *The Lifted Veil*, however, not only considers its realist elements but also how the text negotiates its ostensibly Gothic ones.

In her 2016 article "A True Prophet"? Speculation in Victorian Sensory Physiology and George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*," Meegan Kennedy, builds on the existing historicist approach to *The Lifted Veil* to uncover links between Victorian sciences and scientific ideas not yet considered – including Johannes Muller's nerve theory, cardiac disease and auricular hyperaesthesia – as well as how Eliot centres the novella around the speculation and skepticism

central to scientific method (Kennedy 371, 372, 391). Kennedy's discussion of Latimer's clairvoyance interpreted through the framework of auricular hyperaesthesia (a situation where the ear amplifies sound like a microphone) is particularly relevant as it demonstrates how Latimer's symptoms can be accurately explained using Victorian scientific theory, but also as symptoms appropriate to the tradition of Gothic medicine recognised in romantic novels but not in clinical medicine (Kennedy 374). This reading thus establishes new links between the novella and Victorian sciences without discounting that for many readers, the text phenomenologically aligns with Gothic conventions that prompt readers to apply this interpretive framework to the text.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Derek Woods's article "Sanitation and Telepathy," Woods acknowledges the novella is "a text at once naturalist and gothic" (Woods 56) and offers "paradoxical naturalism" as one way of navigating competing realist and Gothic impulses. For Woods, "mid-Victorian debates about the materiality of mind" (Woods 57) combine with the protagonist's synaesthetic, olfactory telepathy to render supernatural events in physical terms, requiring readers treat it as a natural occurrence within the text's realist framework. These two writers seem to gesture at what Audrey Jaffe's paradigm-shifting study *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real* will ultimately show: that realist fiction is often the realisation of multiple fantasies, rather than fantasy's alternative (Jaffe 3). Space constraints do not permit me to fully engage with the ramifications of this important work for the unusual cases of real/dream reversal in *The Lifted Veil*, but I wish to recognise that this work applied to Eliot's novella might also help us expand

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<sup>8</sup> For readings of the *Lifted Veil* that recognise its Gothic elements, see Helen Small's "Introduction to *The Lifted Veil*" in the Oxford World Classics edition 2009; Anna Despotopoulou, "Gender Transfusions in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil'" (2010) and Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990.

our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic. In the next section of this thesis, I discuss the unacknowledged ways Eliot's novella aligns with classical realist conventions before moving on to show how Eliot uses the embodied reading strategies outlined in Chapter One, to ground her narrative in everyday, embodied cognitive processes.

### **Examining Eliot's Realist Aesthetic in *The Lifted Veil***

Although the existing scholarship on realism and *The Lifted Veil* is substantial, there are some aspects of the text that align with classical realist conventions that have not yet been discussed. In *The Lifted Veil*, the protagonist, Latimer, experiences two types of clairvoyance: visions of the future (called foresight [Eliot *Lifted* 1] or previsions [Eliot *Lifted* 1, 18, 34]) and knowledge of the thought processes of other minds (called insight [Eliot *Lifted* 1, 13, 25]). It is in representing Latimer's previsions that some not yet critically acknowledged, classical realist conventions are manifested in the novella. Latimer's first prevision is one of Prague and he describes his experience of it as

a wondrous scene breaking in upon me, 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—unrefreshed for ages by the dews of night or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze, along the unending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for a day. (Eliot *Lifted* 9)

As Latimer reflects, “Was this a dream—this wonderfully distinct vision—minute in its distinctness down to a patch of rainbow light in the pavement, transmitted through a coloured lamp in the shape of a star?” (Eliot *Lifted* 9), he draws readers’ attention to the realist elements at work in this section. First, the description is filled with minute, visual detail that is typical of realist writing and the addition of this description of the rainbow lamp underscores the importance of attention to detail, indicating to readers that a realist framework is to be applied to this section in spite of the vision’s supernatural genesis. A second indicator that this vision is to be treated as realistic from within the frame of the novel is Latimer’s juxtaposition of the prevision with his previous experience of dreams.

Nothing of this sort had ever occurred in my dreaming experience before, for I had often been humiliated because my dreams were only saved from being utterly disjointed and commonplace by the frequent terrors of nightmare. (Eliot *Lifted* 10)

This juxtaposition in turn draws readers’ attention to the contrast between dream logic that is disjointed and fragmented, and the orderly, minutely detailed description of the prevision described above. Finally, as is common in many realist works, writers often refer to contemporary technology to indicate the real, historical setting of their work. Immediately after comparing his experience of the prevision to his dreaming experience, Latimer states:

But I could not believe that I had been asleep, for I remembered distinctly the gradual breaking-in of the vision upon me, like the new images in a dissolving view, or the growing distinctness of the landscape as the sun lifts up the veil of the morning mist. (Eliot *Lifted* 10)

The dissolving view was a technology first demonstrated by Henry Childe in 1807 and became popular in the early to mid-nineteenth century. This technology made it so that one image

seemed to melt into the next (Small *Lifted* 92). By using the commonplace Victorian experience of the dissolving view as an analogue for understanding the visual experience of Latimer's prevision, Eliot again situates the text in the Victorian period and suggests the prevision is to be treated as realistically as the experience of observing two images in a dissolving view. This claim is further supported by the fact that the other visual experience that Eliot compares Latimer's prevision to is watching a landscape become increasingly distinct as the sun rises over it, the use of a natural, everyday occurrence again suggesting that the prevision should be treated realistically.

Apart from the more visually-dependent conventions of classic realism discussed above, *The Lifted Veil* also adheres to the classic realist convention of presenting the protagonist's process of disillusionment. In the above passage, we see Latimer trying to distinguish himself from ordinary people, saying "my dreams were only saved from being utterly disjointed and commonplace by the frequent terrors of nightmare" (Eliot *Lifted* 10). As Latimer continues to contemplate the cause of his first prevision, he wonders if his illness has led to the liberation of poetic genius from within and compares himself to the literary geniuses Homer, Dante and Milton in turn (Eliot *Lifted* 10). As the novella progresses, however, Latimer begins to realise his commonality and to value the ordinary. This new appreciation is first evident after the unexpected death of his brother which leads to Latimer feeling stung by the recognition that his father reluctantly begins to invest in him and acknowledges "there is hardly any neglected child for whom death has made vacant a more favoured place, who will not understand what I mean" (Eliot *Lifted* 18). This comparison to other neglected children demonstrates Latimer's recognition that he is an ordinary human being and emphasizes the common dimensions of Latimer's experience rather than the supernatural ones that he foregrounded at the beginning of

the narrative. Further, as Latimer's capacity for sympathy increases, so does his awareness of his ordinariness and his share in a common human destiny and human nature. When Latimer's father—the only person for whom he has ever felt deep sympathy (*Lifted* 28)—dies, Latimer says the following:

What are all our personal loves when we have been sharing in that supreme agony? In the first moments when we come away from the presence of death, every other relation to the living is merged, to our feeling, in the great relation of a common nature and a common destiny. (Eliot *Lifted* 28)

Finally, the novella comes full circle and demonstrates Latimer's appreciation for ordinary sensory perceptions through the retrospective narrator's desire for the ordinary sense perceptions of "the earth, the fields, the pebbly brook at the bottom of the rookery, the fresh scent after the rain, the light of the morning through my chamber-window" (Eliot *Lifted* 3) as he recognises he has reached his moment of death.<sup>9</sup> Latimer thus completes the trajectory expected of the protagonist of classic realist writing (Jaffe 5) and of Eliot's specific realist aesthetic (Levine *Aesthetic* 57).

Although applying classic realist conventions can illuminate some overlooked ways that *The Lifted Veil* presents as a realist text, there is another realist dimension of the text that has not been acknowledged at all. In the next section of this chapter, I apply research from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics to present rich, unexplored ways that Eliot's novella enables the verisimilar, realist effects that make its storyworld seem palpably real and intimately

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<sup>9</sup> Meegan Kennedy also recognises Latimer's appreciation for ordinary perceptions in the opening narrative sequence in her article "A True Prophet"? Speculation in Victorian Sensory Physiology and George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*," 2016.

knowable. In doing so, I help expand our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic beyond formal models, as suggested by Sally Shuttleworth (Shuttleworth *Introduction* 3).

### **An Embodied Cognitive Approach to *The Lifted Veil***

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the cognitive linguistic view of cognition is that there is no separation between mind and body. Consequently, all thought is structured by our bodily experiences, and all cognition is embodied cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 247). Further, for cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson, experience, meaning and thought are the product of ongoing interactions between embodied organisms and their environment. This view is called *embodied realism* (Lakoff and Johnson 249). Realist writers, faced with the impossibility of representing the richness of real world experience in all its embodied complexity, use verbal cues that activate readers' existing embodied knowledge. Research by cognitive psychologists Zwaan and Madden has shown interactions with the world leave traces of experience in the brain that are then retrieved and used in the mental representations produced by cognitive processes (Zwaan and Madden 224). Readers in turn assist writers by drawing upon their store of background knowledge gained through everyday perceiving and living in the physical world. Strategies that draw on these stores of embodied knowledge thus enable readers to perceive, in an almost palpable way, the events of storyworlds that are not actually physically experienced through the senses (Auyoung 14).

A common strategy realist writers use to prompt readers to draw on their embodied knowledge is to focus repeatedly on characters' performance of routine physical gestures (Auyoung 20). Reading these gestures cues readers to draw on motor memory and enables readers to instantiate the fictional world with sensory and affective immediacy (Auyoung 20). Further, the degree of fluency with which readers retrieve embodied knowledge can also



heighten their sense of intimacy with the fictional world, transforming the representation of everyday actions into moments of aesthetic pleasure (Auyoung 21). Returning to the opening of *The Lifted Veil*, there are several common gestures that prompt readers to draw on embodied knowledge. Here Latimer is describing his last living moments as he has foreseen them in a prevision.

Just as I am watching a tongue of blue flame rising in the fire, and my lamp is burning low, the horrible contraction will begin at my chest. I shall only have time to reach the bell, and pull it violently, before the sense of suffocation will come. No one will answer my bell. I know why. My two servants are lovers and will have quarrelled. My housekeeper will have rushed out of the house in a fury, two hours before, hoping that Perry will believe she has gone to drown herself... The little scullery-maid is asleep on a bench: she never answers the bell; it does not wake her. The sense of suffocation increases: my lamp goes out with a horrible stench: I make a great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. (Eliot *Lifted Veil* 3)

In this scene, the action of grasping the bell to call for help prompts readers to draw on their motor memory of urgently grasping an object, seamlessly creating a sense of perceptual immediacy. Additionally, as Latimer's sense of suffocation increases and he reaches for the bell again, the additional background detail about why other characters are unwilling or unable to attend to him, as well as having access to Latimer's thoughts, increases the amount of real time and attention paid to this simple, repeated action of grasping the bell to call for help. This increased attention in turn increases the readers' sense of intimacy between them and Latimer, so that they come to feel that they understand Latimer's experience deeply and not just as an aspect

of plot. The sensory vividness of the opening is also supported by the use of multiple types of sensory imagery.

According to G. Gabrielle Starr, the phenomena of sensory imagery occurs when we have the experience of sensation without corresponding sensory input (Starr 276). They also rely on the mechanics of memory as much as on propositions about the world (Starr 277). In the opening scene above, we see instances of visual, motor, haptic and olfactory imagery in the text. Several research studies suggest that some parts of the brain involved in processing sensory imagery align with those used by the same senses in external perception (Starr 277). Regarding motor imagery, it has been clearly established that parts of the brain governing motion are active in looking at images of objects in motion and adjacent areas are activated when reading words that describe motion (Kable et al). The processing of sensory imagery, in some part, relies on the embodied knowledge and memory accumulated through everyday sensory actions. Additionally, some types of sensory imagery rely on multiple types of sensory memory. To imagine the “blue flame rising in the fire” (Eliot *Lifted* 3) above, readers need to draw on visual imagery as well as motor imagery since the flame is involved in the motion of rising. Haptic and motor imagery are then layered onto the scene through Latimer reaching for the bell, which thus involves embodied knowledge of these two sensory domains also being called upon to imaginatively construct the above scene. The alternative micro-narratives about why Latimer’s call for help—including the narrative of the quarrelling servants and the little scullery maid who does not respond—then contribute to the verisimilar effects of the scene by adding layers to the main narrative and creating a storyworld of life-like complexity as readers are required to visualise these narratives within the main narrative. We then return to the main event of Latimer suffocating which is given heightened urgency through the sense of increasing suffocation and the introduction of a

“horrible stench” (Eliot *Lifted* 3) as the lamp goes out. Research on olfactory and gustatory imagery has shown these types of sensory imagery are rarely neutral but involve strong evaluations of pleasure and displeasure (Stevenson and Case 245-246). The “horrible stench,” being an olfactory image now gives the scene an overall, strong and unpleasant feel. Further, research has shown that people tend to remember scenes or events presented through multiple senses simultaneously better than those presented through one sense alone. Thus, the strong sense of a realistic, perceptually and affectively vivid opening sequence of *Lifted Veil* is well-explained by the representation of everyday actions and layering of sensory imagery that relies on readers’ stored embodied knowledge.

In combination with everyday actions and sensory imagery, Eliot sometimes uses metacognitive cues to counterintuitively create a sense of depth in her fictional world. Elaine Auyoung describes metacognition as the self-conscious process of reflecting upon and thereby controlling our cognitive actions (Auyoung 82). In *Lifted Veil*, Eliot uses metacognitive cues to prompt readers to go beyond the reading practice of minimally drawing on background knowledge to comprehend plot events. When Latimer describes his childhood, he recalls having a “a tender mother” and how “even now, after the dreary lapse of long years, a slight trace of sensation accompanies the remembrance of her caress as she held me on her knee—her arms round my little body, her cheek pressed on mine” (Eliot *Lifted* 4). The routine gesture of pressing a cheek against another’s draws on haptic imagery, which is powerful because it involves motor processes, sensations of touch and visual systems, and because research has shown haptic imagery involves many of the same areas involved in real touch (Yoo 581-585). This image of the tender mother is quickly juxtaposed by the description Latimer gives after his mother has died: “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” (Eliot *Lifted* 4). Here readers are positioned to experience Latimer’s loss phenomenologically by first having to create the image of Latimer’s mother looking at him lovingly, then having to revise the scene and reimagine it without his mother’s loving gaze or open arms. Further, this focus on commonplace, visual and haptic imagery together to convey affection increases the perceptual immediacy and vividness of the scene by activating more than one sensory modality (Murray et al, 125-135). Eliot thus uses metacognitive cues in combination with sensory imagery to activate embodied knowledge and prompt readers to create more nuanced and complex representations of story events, counterintuitively creating depth that reinforces the novella’s sense of being life-like in its realism.

Another way writers can alter the life-like quality of their writing is by varying the *fluency* or ease with which readers perform cognitive acts in the reading process (Auyoung 32).<sup>10</sup> Cognitive acts that are effortful and effortless can both be a source of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>11</sup> In this section, I will focus on the way texts that we comprehend with ease can seem more true and more beautiful than those that provoke scepticism or challenge us (Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman 364-382). A seemingly ordinary, unimportant event in *The Lifted Veil* occurs after Latimer’s second prevision when he attempts to revive himself with perfume.

Seeking to calm myself still further, I went into my bedroom, adjoining the *salon*, and opened a case of eau-de-Cologne; took out a bottle; went through the process of taking out the cork very neatly, and then rubbed the reviving spirit over my hands and forehead,

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<sup>10</sup> See Adam L. Alter and Daniel M. Oppenheimer, “Uniting the Tribes of Fluency to Form a Metacognitive Nation” (2009) for an overview of fluency effects.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the aesthetic pleasure of challenging cognitive acts, see Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, (2006).

and under my nostrils, drawing a new delight from the scent because I had procured it by slow details of labour, and by no strange sudden madness. (Eliot *Lifted* 12)

In this scene, Eliot represents the commonplace process of reviving oneself using smelling salts or strong scent, slowing the narrative pace so that readers are required to thoroughly consider the smaller steps in the process. This process, like the everyday, routine gesture of grasping a bell mentioned in the opening sequence, draws on visual imagery and motor memory (to visualise the process of taking out the bottle) as well as haptic imagery (rubbing the perfume on hands and forehead) and finally olfactory imagery (delighting in the scent of the perfume) prompting readers to draw on stored, embodied experience to interpret the scene, while using sensory imagery to layer sensory perceptions and create an overall vivid and palpably real representation. Further, unlike the extraordinary prevision that leaves Latimer feeling ill, this everyday process is pleasurable and calming. It provides Latimer with a sense of control and foregrounds the restorative power of ordinary, everyday actions. Finally, because the process of using perfume or strong scent to revive a person is likely to be familiar to most readers, readers comprehend this sequence of actions with an ease and immediacy that becomes a source of pleasure in itself.

### **Embodied Realist Strategy One: Multimodal Integration**

As mentioned above, research on the processing of imagery has shown that people tend to remember a tone and image presented together better than when either is presented alone (Murray et al). Building on this research, it has been argued that readers are likely to find fictional scenes that draw on multiple modes of imagery more vivid than those that rely on only one sense (Starr *Imagery* 5). As in several of her other novels, in *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot is critical of characters who are overly reliant on external vision and who allow that sense to dominate their judgement. Through multi-sensory imagery, she explicitly draws a link between engaging with

the world through multiple senses and accessing the aesthetic dimension of observed phenomena. Ultimately then, Eliot challenges the typical, visually-dominant Victorian sensorium and the so-called, Victorian “autonomisation of sight” to ground her novel in real, embodied experience.

Early in *The Lifted Veil*, Latimer has his head examined by Mr Letherall, a phrenologist, “who one day took my small head between his large hands, and pressed it here and there in an exploratory, auspicious manner” (Eliot *Lifted Veil* 6) before declaring “the deficiency is there, sir—there; and here... Here is the excess. That must be brought out, sir, and this must be laid to sleep” (Eliot *Lifted* 6). Although it initially seems Eliot supports this assessment because the areas mentioned correspond to an excess of idealism and fancy that are characteristic of Latimer’s temperament, the science-heavy educative approach used to correct this excess fails to bring about the desired change in Latimer’s disposition. Indeed, although Latimer is at this time “hungry for human deeds and human emotions” (Eliot *Lifted* 7) his disposition is forced to grow in “uncongenial medium” (Eliot *Lifted Veil* 7), as he is “plentifully crammed with the mechanical powers, the elementary bodies, and the phenomena of electricity and magnetism” (Eliot *Lifted* 7). Here it may seem that Eliot is critical of scientific endeavours, but as with the use of visual information, it is not scientific inquiry that Eliot critiques but particular applications of scientific method. Indeed, a closer examination of the passage in which Mr Letherall examines Latimer reveals that Mr Letherall did not simply apply phrenological practice but “pulled [Latimer’s] head about as if he wanted to buy and cheapen it (Eliot *Lifted* 6). This statement cuts to the heart of Eliot’s position: it is not that Eliot does not value the scientific or visual methods of assessment, but rather that Eliot is critical of visual information being used reductively or in a way that distorts the complexity of phenomena. In Latimer’s case, the emphasis on what is

physically observable about his condition to the exclusion of his relational and moral development is challenged through Eliot's use of multisensory imagery which not only builds a connection between readers and Latimer via embodied experience, but between engaging with the real world and accessing the aesthetic dimension of reality.

At one point in the novella, Latimer is given a science lesson on the movement of water and advised that "an improved man... knew the reason why water ran down-hill" (Eliot *Lifted* 7). Latimer responds with "I was glad of the running water; I could watch it and listen to it gurgling among the pebbles... I had perfect confidence that there were good reasons for what was so very beautiful" (Eliot *Lifted* 7). Integrating information from both vision and sound—and thus visual, auditory and motor imagery pathways of embodied experience—Latimer is able to see beauty in the movement of a stream that is lost on his scientific, explanation-focused tutors. Further, we, with Latimer, come to experience beauty in the ordinary and it is at this moment, focused on the very ordinary experience of visualising a stream pass over some pebbles, that the familiarity of the experience adds to the aesthetic pleasure of the layered, multi-sensory image and enables Latimer to become a figure of sympathy. Finally, as in the real-world where integrating information from multiple senses produces interpretations more likely to align with external reality, Latimer's multi-sensory engagement establishes a link between the aesthetic dimension of phenomena and reality-grounded engagement with the world. It thus provides a solution to the "autonomisation of sight" noted by Jonathan Crary and reinforces Eliot's realist aesthetic, which centres on celebrating the ordinary through accurately representing it. It should be noted however, that Eliot is not a naïve realist. Some scholars, such as J. Hillis Miller have argued that Eliot believes all "seeing is falsified by the limitations of point of view" (Miller 143) and that knowledge external to the observer is impossible. Others, such as Sally Shuttleworth, have

argued that Eliot's views on the accessibility of external reality have evolved alongside her writing career: in *Adam Bede*, Eliot appears to be a naïve realist, but by the time Eliot has written *Daniel Deronda*, her views on access to reality have changed, her view now being that all observation (including scientific observation) involves observing phenomena through a schema that necessarily shapes the interpretation of reality (Shuttleworth *Make-Believe* 1). Space constraints do not allow for a full discussion of this debate. It is important to recognise, however, that as in Eliot's theory of sympathetic interpretation—where Eliot recognises that we cannot access absolute truth but that it is necessary to strive against subjectivism if we are to accurately interpret the words and actions of others (Anger 105)—Eliot acknowledges “approximate truth is the only truth attainable but at least one must strive for that” (Eliot *Letters* 362).

In addition to using multimodal imagery, pleasurable experiences in *The Lifted Veil* are often represented using more than one sensory modality. In spite of having a constitution “finely organized for pain, but with hardly any fibres that responded to pleasure” (*Lifted Veil* 24), Latimer's pleasurable moments are typically described using more than one sense. As Latimer describes his first vision of the Swiss Alps and their exalting effect, doubling the moment that Victor Frankenstein observes the Swiss Alps in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the multimodal description renders the sublime moment more vivid. Latimer begins with the visual image, “the first sight of the Alps with the setting sun on them, as we descended the Jura seemed to me like an entrance into heaven” (LV 7). However, the visual image is quickly followed by gustatory imagery: “the three years of my life there were spent in a perpetual sense of exaltation, as if from a draught of delicious wine” (LV 7). Again, this pleasurable experience is a common experience—that of observing a vast mountain and being overwhelmed by it in the sense of the Romantic sublime—and therefore one to which readers can relate. Although the Burkean



sublime typically extends the observer by presenting them with an experience that is unusual or beyond the reach of the individual to challenge sensory organs (Burke), the experience of being confronted by the sublime through the vastness of an object (such as a mountain) is likely a familiar experience. At the same time, this ordinary experience is made simultaneously more pleasant and vivid by being unusually combined with a domestic pleasure: the gustatory experience of drinking delicious wine. In the next section, I explore Eliot's use of a synaesthetic sensorium, a strategy which describes one sense perception in terms of another, and which takes this combining of embodied experiences to another level.

### **Embodied Realist Strategy Two: The Synaesthetic Sensorium**

John Picker, commenting on the use of sound in *The Lifted Veil* recognises that Latimer tends to process the world aurally (Picker 4). Derek Woods and Megan Kennedy in their studies of Eliot's novella both note that in describing Latimer's extrasensory experience more than one form of sensory modality is used to render it, typically synaesthetically (Woods 58; Kennedy). In this thesis, I combine insights from all three scholars and argue that Latimer's sensorium, although predominantly aural, is mediated by other senses. Eliot's protagonist is thus rendered both unique and ordinary, his sensory descriptions requiring readers to draw on their knowledge of embodied experiences yet organise it in unusual ways.

Early in the novella, Latimer describes his ordinary childhood experience in synaesthetic terms, rendering it accessible as well as refreshingly novel and vivid. He recalls:

I remember still the mingled trepidation and delicious excitement with which I was affected by the tramping of the horses on the pavement in the echoing stables, by the loud resonance of the groom's voices, by the booming bark of the dogs as my father's carriage

thundered under the archway of the courtyard, by the din of the gong as it gave notice of luncheon and dinner. (Eliot *Lifted* 5)

Although Latimer's focus is clearly aural and a range of sounds are noted in this passage—tramping horses, echoes, resonance of voices, booming bark, thundering carriages, din of gongs—these sounds are experienced within an overarching affective framework of “mingled trepidation” (Eliot *Lifted* 5) and “delicious excitement” (Eliot *Lifted* 5). Here, the ordinary sounds of animals, of human voices and of objects that mark ordinary moments of routine, such as the luncheon gong, require readers to draw on the ordinary, embodied experience of these and similar events. As noted by Auyoung, it is not necessary for readers to always have experienced exactly the same sensory experience that the writer describes; it is enough for readers to have experienced something like it (for example a luncheon bell instead of a gong) and have their embodied knowledge activated. Readers can then use their embodied knowledge to construct the experience described (Auyoung 26). In this case, however, the ordinary sounds are rendered unusually vivid by being first described as infused by affective qualities of trepidation and “delicious excitement” (Eliot *Lifted* 5). Here the gustatory imagery used transforms the physiological sensations associated with excitement, adding another textured layer to the sounds imagined and giving them a sharp distinctiveness that contributes to the verisimilar effect of being palpably real.

Similarly, when Latimer describes his fears and desires, he does so in terms that are both overwhelmingly aural and synaesthetic. In approaching Bertha, his love interest whom he has foreseen will one day be his wife, Latimer confesses that he dare not ask her about her current feeling toward him, saying, he fears “the dread lest a word of contempt or denial should fall upon me like a corrosive acid” (Eliot *Lifted* 24). Here we see that not only are Latimer's physical sensations overwhelmingly aural, but his desires and fears also manifest in aural, but synaesthetic

forms. For Latimer, a verbal rejection is as intensely painful as corrosive acid. Here again, Eliot cues not only embodied knowledge of the auditory form but also of tactile experience with corrosive substances. Consequently, readers come to understand Latimer's experience intimately through drawing on embodied knowledge—specifically motor imagery, aural imagery and tactile imagery—to make sense of his distinctive, synaesthetic sensorium and thus his unusual way of experiencing the world. The concrete, embodied perspective offered readers not only creates a sense of a palpably, tangible storyworld but becomes yet another means of challenging the autonomisation of sight.

Interestingly, Eliot does not limit Latimer's synesthetic sensorium to describing ordinary physical and affective experiences, but also uses it to describe his extraordinary experience of prevision. During the first prevision of Bertha, Latimer describes Bertha noting

the face had not a girlish expression: the features were sharp, the pale grey 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. (Eliot *Lifted* 11)

In this scenario, Latimer describes a visual scene but as in the example above, draws on a tactile analogue that also involves motor imagery—the sensation of a wind that is cutting—to render the effects of the vision almost concrete and tangible through the unusual description of the visual image in visceral, tactile terms. This time, even the extraordinary experience of prevision is rendered vivid and almost palpably real through the close layering of visual imagery with an analogue that relies on multiple other types of imagery. Thus, Eliot succeeds in simultaneously rendering Latimer's experience extraordinary yet intimately knowable, while grounding it in concrete every day, embodied experience.

### **Embodied Realist Strategy Three: Sympathy-via-Sensory-Analogue**

Sympathy-via-sensory-analogue is the last of the embodied realist strategies I consider in this thesis. Similar to the synaesthetic sensorium, this embodied realist strategy ensures both Latimer's ordinary and extraordinary experiences are able to be imagined with such vividness and perceptual immediacy that they become intimately knowable. However, in contrast to the synaesthetic sensorium that relies on multi-sensory involvement, sympathy-via-sensory-analogue involves Eliot drawing on embodied experiences to act as analogues that rely on stored embodied knowledge to communicate meaning. To subtly and effectively communicate Latimer's idiosyncratic experience of the common human emotion of jealousy, Eliot describes Latimer as wincing from every confident action of his brother, "as my eye winced from an intruding mote" (Eliot *Lifted* 20). This analogue allows readers to draw on similar embodied experiences of wincing as a sharp object approaches their eye, simultaneously experiencing aesthetic pleasure at being able to call upon ordinary, stored embodied knowledge to interpret the text, yet feeling the unpleasantness associated with recalling the physical experience mentioned. Further, the complexity of embodied reading experience here not only creates verisimilar realist effects through the sense of textured, perceptual immediacy, but also allows readers to genuinely sympathise with Latimer because embodied knowledge common to Latimer and readers, not subjective interpretation, is the basis of that sympathy.

Eliot also uses sympathy-via-sensory-analogue to render Latimer's experiences of foresight and insight accessible to ordinary readers. Returning to the first of Latimer's previsions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we are reminded that Eliot compared the onset of that vision to "the new images in a dissolving view, or the growing distinctness of the landscape as the sun lifts up the veil of the morning mist" (Eliot *Lifted* 9). Two analogues of embodied

experience are used to convey the experience of the prevision here: the first analogue, watching images come together in a dissolving view, is historically-specific and gives a contemporary flavour to the prevision; the second analogue is much more universally accessible—experiencing a landscape become increasingly distinct as the sun rises over it. As mentioned above, readers do not have to have experienced the embodied experience in all its particulars to activate stored embodied knowledge; rather readers need to have experienced something like it (in the case of the sun rising over a landscape covered with dew, experience of a sun rise is sufficient) (Auyoung 28). Interestingly, each of these two analogues captures competing aspects of the prevision: the dissolving view conveys the sense of the prevision consisting of two, super-imposed images, while the analogy of the sun rise over the mist captures the sense of the prevision becoming increasingly distinct. The analogues together create a visually complex image of the prevision through prompting readers to draw on stored, embodied experiences. They thus render Latimer’s unique, extrasensory experience intimately knowable to ordinary readers.<sup>12</sup> Finally, this use of visual analogues, reliant upon visual and motor imagery, demonstrates that Eliot is not critical of all information obtained visually but rather only of reductive uses of visual data. She clearly values visual analogues that imaginatively engage readers to enable them to understand her protagonist’s extrasensory experiences.

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, if readers do not know what a dissolving view is, part of the scene’s vividness and complexity is not accessible to them (though this scenario would be unlikely for most of Eliot’s contemporaries). In *When Fiction Feels Real*, Auyoung, in her study of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* acknowledges the historical specificity of that text and the reduced accessibility of readers who may not have intimate knowledge of the embodied experiences detailed (see Chapter One).

Eliot also effectively uses sympathy-via-sensory analogue to enable ordinary readers to understand Latimer's insight into other minds. Not long after the second prevision, Latimer complains that he began to be aware of

an obtrusion on my mind of the mental process going forward in first one person, and then another, with whom I happened to be in contact: the vagrant, frivolous ideas and emotions of some uninteresting acquaintance—Mrs. Filmore, for example—would force themselves on my consciousness like an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect. (Eliot *Lifted* 13)

As discussed above, Latimer's sensorium is overwhelmingly aural in its focus and this emphasis is reflected in his "superadded consciousness" (Eliot *Lifted* 13). Starr notes that auditory imagery is classed into four categories and the processes involved in decoding music, for example, differ artistically and phenomenologically from those involved in decoding speech, metrical speech and general sounds (Starr *Imagery* 271). Here, Eliot compares the thoughts Latimer accesses to the embodied experience of hearing music played poorly. In doing so, she suggests that accessing other minds, like hearing music, involves an element of anticipated pleasure, yet similar to the unexpected moment of hearing music played poorly, surprises one with its cacophonous unpleasantness. The further analogy of comparing Latimer's insight to hearing the loud activity of an imprisoned insect serves as a multi-modal analogue, requiring readers to draw on stored auditory, visual and motor knowledge to instantiate the predominantly aural analogue. The insect analogue also captures Latimer's sense of being trapped and being unable to escape the rush of thoughts, while drawing on a non-human analogue conveys Latimer's impersonal and uninterested response to the thoughts of other humans. In contrast to Daniel Deronda who with his very ordinary capacities is able to enter deeply into the predicaments of others, Latimer

responds to the thoughts of others as undifferentiated sound. These analogues, cuing readers to draw on stored knowledge of ordinary, embodied experiences enables them to experience pleasure in being able to use them to sympathise with Latimer and understand his extrasensory experience, even as they vividly convey Latimer's inability to sympathise with others.

In this section, I have presented Latimer's insight into other minds as obstructed by his own inability to sympathise but that the clairvoyance itself is considered a credible, if supernatural, phenomenon within the text. Terry Eagleton, taking a contrasting perspective, has argued that Latimer's insight into other minds is only imagined projection (Eagleton 56-57). I find this reading dismisses the realist treatment of the supernatural phenomena, including, as discussed in my analysis of the first prevision above, Latimer's own sustained efforts to discredit the phenomena as clairvoyance. Following Derek Woods, who has also noted how the "earnest tone of the text" works against Eagleton's reading, I maintain that Latimer's telepathy is more convincingly read as a supernatural but real phenomenon within the text and that the primary barrier to sympathy is his own disposition. In the next section of this chapter, I show how sympathy-via-sensory-analogue provides a basis for genuine sympathy between readers and characters, addressing some of the criticisms levelled at Eliot's ethics of sympathy.

### **Embodiment: A Valid Basis for an Ethics of Sympathy**

As discussed earlier, central to Eliot's realist aesthetic is the view that art ought to expand our capacity for sympathy, teaching us "to feel not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness" (Eliot *Natural* 145). Yet since the last decade of the twentieth century, Eliot

scholarship has frequently read sympathy in Eliot's novels as disguised egoism.<sup>13</sup> In *Victorian Interpretation* (2005) Suzy Anger demonstrates that although Eliot is well aware of obstacles to accurate interpretation, she holds there is an ethical imperative to try to understand others' actions and words as they intend them (Anger 99). Indeed, while Eliot seems aware that we cannot access absolute truth, it is necessary to strive against subjectivism if we are to accurately interpret the words and actions of others (Anger 105).

This view of interpretation appears to be accurately represented in Eliot's *Lifted Veil*. Although in possession of extraordinary access to others' thoughts, Latimer fails to accurately understand them because of his unwillingness to struggle against subjectivism. In his interactions with his brother Alfred for example, Latimer is unable to let go of his antipathy towards Alfred, with the effect that "[Alfred] 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" (Eliot *Lifted* 14). Because Latimer is unwilling to try to understand Alfred's thoughts as he intended them, he is unable to interact with them as a pathway into an individual's thought processes and ways of thinking and feeling. In fact, in spite of Latimer's antipathy causing his "diseased consciousness [to be]... more intensely and continually occupied with his thoughts and emotions, than with those of any other person who came in my way" (Eliot *Lifted* 14) and thus providing him with more access to Alfred's thoughts than to any other character, Latimer is unable to engage with those thoughts as anything other than an irritating experience akin to that unpleasant, sensation one experiences when one hears grating metal. Ironically,

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminisms, Mass Culture and Victorian Sensationalism*, (1992) and Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*, (1996).



because of the embodied experience mentioned here, the sympathy-via-sensory-analogue strategy intervenes to enable readers to draw on their stored embodied knowledge—calling on motor imagery and auditory imagery—to make sense of this sensory analogue and thus intimately understand Latimer’s experience, while experiencing the verisimilar effects of the vivid imagery. As a result of stored embodied knowledge providing a bridge between the reader’s ordinary experience and Latimer’s extraordinary one, readers are paradoxically able to genuinely sympathise with Latimer.

Due to space limitations, this thesis is unable to comprehensively address all the criticisms aimed at Eliot’s ethics of sympathy. In this final section of the chapter, I hope to show that embodied realist strategies enable us to respond to a particularly scathing critique of Eliot’s ethics of sympathy, launched by Thomas Albrecht, specifically in relation to *The Lifted Veil*. In his article “Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*,” (2006), Albrecht defines sympathy as “emotional responses, what Eliot calls sympathy and compassion, by which she means a person’s ability to feel and suffer with another” (Albrecht 437). Albrecht then moves on to discuss Latimer’s conversion narrative, specifically his transformation into a more sympathetic character after his father’s death, which has a levelling impact and enables Latimer to recognise his share in humanity’s common lot. Returning to the moment of conversion which was discussed earlier:

In the first moments when we come away from the presence of death, every other relation to the living is merged to our feeling in the great relation of a common nature and a common destiny. (Eliot *Lifted* 31)

After Latimer’s moment of disillusionment, readers are told that “in that state of mind, I joined Bertha in her private sitting room” (Eliot *Lifted* 31). Upon sitting down, Latimer suddenly

becomes aware that the veil that had concealed Bertha's thoughts from him has been lifted and that he now sees "that the darkness had hidden no landscape from me, but only a blank, prosaic wall" (Eliot Lifted 31). The antipathy that readers take Latimer to feel for others is consequently shifted to Bertha and the narrative is thematically resolved by expelling the negative figure (Bertha) and Latimer wins our pity having grown in his own sympathetic capacities. According to Albrecht, the problem with this conversion narrative is that it figures Bertha in terms determined by Latimer. In this novella, the visual language used at the moment of illumination is not used literally but figuratively. Because Latimer uses textual metaphors ("blank, prosaic wall") to interpret the visual ones, when Latimer sees "a "blank, prosaic wall," this is not a literal visual description but rather his subjective description for what he sees. Since Eliot's ethics of sympathy is intended to allow for an understanding of the other on their own terms, the distinction between sympathy and egotism collapses because we can only relate to the other via the self and their similarity or dissimilarity from our self (Albrecht 454).

While this reading is persuasive, the embodied realist strategies discussed in this chapter provide a way around this dilemma. Embodied realist strategies rely on readers drawing on stored knowledge of common, ordinary experiences. These experiences thus serve as a legitimate foundation for sympathy because they rely on embodied human experiences that can serve as a bridge between readers and characters, by passing the need for subjective interpretations. While absolute knowledge of the experience of others is impossible, the embodied experience common to human beings in virtue of us all being embodied provides a basis from which we can struggle against subjectivism and rise to the ethical imperative of trying to understand literary and real others on their own terms. Eliot herself seems to anticipate the grounding elements of embodiment and in an unpublished essay writes:

They might have in no single case the same name for the same thing, but ...they would of necessity have much agreement in the metaphorical development of their speech: above & below, light & dark, fast & slow, warm & cold, sweet & sour, hard & soft, smooth & rough, heavy & light, noisy & still, cloudy & clear, wet & dry, far & near, & so on, would be the same qualities for each group, & the words expressing them would be transferred from the external to the internal, from the visible and palpable to the invisible and imaginary. (Eliot Questions 388)

Here Eliot recognises that although individual people may not use the same word for the same experience, in virtue of our common, embodied, human experience, sensations such as heat, light, notions of distances, sound and other sensory-based concepts, are experienced in similar ways by all human beings across cultures. Thus, requests for sympathy via these pathways—and by extension reading strategies that are based on them—enable human beings to sympathise with each other without having to relate to the other via our own subjective experience. There will still be obstacles to accurate interpretation and the sympathising person will still need to strive against subjectivism as noted by Anger above, but sympathy via embodied experience effectively grounds the experience in shared rather than subjective experience.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued for expanding our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic by using embodied realist strategies to help us understand the realist effects they make possible in *Lifted Veil*. In the final section of this thesis, I will suggest ways that embodied realist strategies may be productively used to analyse a novel that is universally regarded as realist, Eliot's *Middlemarch*. In doing so, I show how these strategies enable us to account for realist effects that have not yet been considered, again extending our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic.

### **Coda: Exploring the Synaesthetic Sensorium in Eliot's *Middlemarch***

Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing that embodied realist strategies enable us to reimagine *The Lifted Veil*'s relationship to realism, revealing new ways the novella relies on our stored knowledge of everyday, embodied experiences and expanding our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic. In this last section of the thesis, I wish to gesture at the research potential of applying these strategies to other texts in Eliot's oeuvre, beginning with Eliot's quintessential novel, *Middlemarch*. Space limitations prevent a discussion of all three embodied realist strategies. Instead, I focus on two of Eliot's most extraordinary, yet ordinary characters, Dorothea Brook and Mary Garth, and by analysing their characterisation at key moments using the concept of the synaesthetic sensorium, I show how this strategy enables these characters to retain their distinctiveness whilst enabling readers to phenomenologically experience the verisimilar, realist effects of vividness and perceptual immediacy. Ultimately, this chapter's preliminary analysis extends our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic.

#### **Cognitive Literary Approaches to *Middlemarch*: A Brief Overview**

Several cognitive studies have already been conducted on Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Cognitive literary theorist Alan Palmer, drawing on research from cognitive science and philosophy of mind, has applied attribution theory and social minds theory to reveal the presence and impact of intermental minds (compound minds such as when two minds are involved in joint construction) to provide a more complete understanding of processes of comprehension of *Middlemarch* (Palmer 221-223). Kamilla Walker, working with conceptual metaphor theory, has demonstrated how a cognitive linguistic analysis of vivid metaphors in *Middlemarch* reveals their everyday, embodied basis and connection to more commonplace conceptual metaphors (see Walker, "Conceptual Metaphors of Anger in *Middlemarch*" [2017] and "Conceptual Metaphors

of *Pride in Middlemarch*” [2017]). Taking a slightly different approach to conceptual metaphor and combining it with insights on emotion and mirror neurons from cognitive science, Kay Young in *Imagining Minds* (2010) considers how the physiology of sound figures empathy and a genuine meeting of minds (Young 77). In this section, I will again focus on the phenomenological, realist effects of Eliot’s work, demonstrating how the use of the synaesthetic sensorium in *Middlemarch* renders Dorothea and Mary Garth—two characters explicitly described as ordinary—phenomenologically distinctive and intimately knowable.

### **Synaesthetic Sensoriums in *Middlemarch***

To fully illuminate Dorothea and Mary Garth’s distinctiveness, I first discuss Tertius Lydgate, a Middlemarch doctor and his sensory appraisal of Rosamund Vincy, a young beautiful Middlemarch woman, to provide a contrast to the descriptions of the other two Middlemarch women. Not long after arriving at the town of Middlemarch, Tertius Lydgate is described by the inhabitants as being “uncommonly clever” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 284). In spite of his cleverness, however, Lydgate’s observations tend to rely on vision, as is typical of characters situated in the Victorian period. On observing Rosamund Vincy, his internal description of her translates her visual loveliness into an aural one: “She is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 125). Here Eliot uses synaesthesia to represent vision in terms of the aural so that the immersive, melodic associations of exquisite music suffuse the description of Rosamund’s visual loveliness and through the use of two forms of imagery—aural and visual—render her physical attractiveness more vivid and sharp. The overall effect here, through activating readers’ stored, but vague, embodied knowledge of “exquisite music” and combining it with the more concrete memory of the highly visual description of Rosamund given earlier in the novel—one in

which she is described as possessing “hair of infantine fairness, neither flaxen nor yellow” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 112) and “eyes of heavenly blue” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 112)—is to enable readers to phenomenologically experience Lydgate’s sense of Rosamund’s beauty as surpassing that of any other woman. At the same time, *Middlemarch*’s narrator has primed readers to not fully endorse Lydgate’s judgment. For example, although the narrator describes Rosamund in superlative terms—“eyes of heavenly blue” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 112)—and therefore of a divine, rather than common, human hue, the narrator also warns that those eyes were of such a blue that that they were “deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 113). Here then, the narrator hints at the capacity for observations based on the visual alone to conceal, rather than reveal, characters’ true natures.

Paradoxically, when synaesthesia is used to describe Dorothea Brook and Mary Garth, the use of the synaesthetic sensorium serves to reveal an extraordinary uniqueness in these ordinary characters. Early in chapter one of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea is examining jewels with her sister Celia when she suddenly exclaims:

“How very beautiful these gems are!” said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. “It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven.” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 5)

Although *Middlemarch*’s narrator will eventually describe Dorothea as one of those “Therasas” whose “loving heart beats and sobs after an unattained goodness...and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed” (Eliot *Middlemarch* 5), here the representation of Dorothea experiencing deeply the colour of the gems such that the colour

seems to suffuse it like scent, phenomenologically gestures at her distinctive ability to feel deeply the experiences of her world and enter deeply into the experiences of others. Further, by using the embodied realist strategy of the synaesthetic sensorium, Eliot cues readers to draw on stored embodied knowledge to interpret this ordinary scene of examining gems and experience a newfound vividness and aesthetic pleasure due to the unusual combination of visual and olfactory imagery. The novel translation of one sense perception in terms of another enables readers to enter intimately into Dorothea's unique phenomenological experience of her world even as it simultaneously increases the verisimilar effects of the scene.

In a different part of *Middlemarch*, the ordinary, poor yet principled Mary Garth is also described by the narrator in synaesthetic terms. This time, it is the narrator, rather than the character herself, who engages the use of the synaesthetic sensorium in order to effectively describe Mary to readers. The narrator states:

If you want to know more particularly how Mary looked, ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street to-morrow, if you are there on the watch: she will not be among those daughters of Zion who are haughty, and walk with stretched-out necks and wanton eyes, mincing as they go: let all those pass, and fix your eyes on some small plump brownish person of firm but quiet carriage, who looks about her, but does not suppose that anybody is looking at her. If she has a broad face and square brow, well-marked eyebrows and curly dark hair, a certain expression of amusement in her glance which her mouth keeps the secret of, and for the rest features entirely insignificant—take that ordinary but not disagreeable person for a portrait of Mary Garth. If you made her smile, she would show you perfect little teeth; if you made her angry, she would not raise

her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you have ever tasted the flavor of. (Eliot *Middlemarch* 336)

Unlike in the case of Rosamund Vincy, the visual description of Mary Garth occurs much later in the novel, well after readers have come to cherish and respect Mary on her own terms. And, also in contrast to Rosamund Vincy's description, here the narrator takes care to emphasise visually Mary's ordinariness and commonplaceness. Yet at the end of the passage, the narrator states that "if you made her angry, she would not raise her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you had ever tasted the flavour of" (Eliot *Middlemarch* 336). Here, the narrator highlights that in an area where Mary has control, namely, her response to offences, she is a distinctive and an unusual character, responding with language so strong, it evokes a sense of bitterness. The use of the synaesthetic sensorium here cues readers to draw on their stored embodied knowledge of the "bitterest thing they have ever tasted" to comprehend the sting of Mary's words. Further, by using superlative language again ("bitterest"), Eliot enables readers to respond individually to the description and gain a type of aesthetic pleasure in being able to imagine the causticness of Mary's words since they are to evoke what is equal to the most bitter thing readers have tasted and not beyond it. Additionally, the unusual conversion of caustic words in terms of gustatory imagery gives Mary a vividness and distinctiveness in spite of her overwhelmingly ordinary visual appearance. Thus, as with Dorothy, Mary is rendered extraordinary in spite of her overwhelming commonplaceness.

This chapter has briefly touched on the use of the synesthetic sensorium in Eliot's *Middlemarch* to demonstrate how Eliot cues readers to draw on stored, embodied experience to phenomenologically experience some of her ordinary characters as paradoxically extraordinary. Further I have shown how applying this strategy to a well-researched work such as *Middlemarch*



allows us to see new ways that Eliot celebrates the ordinary and commonplace that is at the heart of Eliot's realist aesthetic, while explaining the vivid phenomenological effects of her writing. This coda has thus extended our understanding of an established realist text as well as extended our understanding of Eliot's realist aesthetic.

George Eliot's oeuvre has long been considered overwhelmingly realist, especially valued for the psychological depth of its characterisation and the new directions into which it took the English novel (Levine Art 34). This thesis has tried to extend our understanding of her realist aesthetic by drawing on cognitive psychology to explain the verisimilar effects that make some of her most beloved works intimately knowable and palpably real. Applying what I call embodied realist strategies to an analysis of *The Lifted Veil*, I have shown how these strategies can productively reveal how Eliot achieves her realist effects, while extending our understanding of the ways in which this novella meets the criteria of a realist text. As in the coda above, further application of these strategies to texts established as realist within Eliot's oeuvre, can help us develop a deeper understanding of the ways these novels illustrate central aspects of her realist aesthetic, such as the celebration of the distinctive yet commonplace. They can thus help us to understand how these novels enact realism not only at formal levels, but phenomenological levels, opening up new lines of enquiry in Eliot scholarship.

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