The letter below was written in 1866 by the English novelist Marian Evans Lewes (who used the pen name George Eliot) in response to a letter from an American woman, Melusina Fay Peirce.

Read the letter carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the rhetorical strategies Lewes uses to establish her position about the development of a writer.

My dear Madam

I do not usually answer letters unless they demand an answer, finding the days too short for much correspondence; but I am so deeply touched by your words of tenderness and by the details you tell me about yourself, that I cannot keep total silence towards you.

My consciousness is not of the triumphant kind your generous joy on my behalf leads you to imagine. Exultation is a dream before achievement, and rarely comes after. What comes after, is rather the sense that the work has been produced within one, like offspring, developing and growing by some force of which one's own life has only served as a vehicle, and that what is left of oneself is only a poor husk. Besides, the vision of something that life might be and that one's own ignorance and incompleteness have hindered it from being, presses more and more as time advances. The only problem for us, the only hope, is to try and unite the utmost activity with the utmost resignation. Does this seem melancholy?

I want to tell you not to fancy yourself old because you are thirty, or to regret that you have not yet written anything. It is a misfortune to many that they begin to write when they are young and give out all that is genuine and peculiar in them when it can be no better than trashy, unripe fruit. There is nothing more dreary than the life of a writer who has early exhausted himself. I enter into those young struggles of yours to get knowledge, into the longing you feel to do something more than domestic duties while yet you are held fast by womanly necessities for neatness and household perfection as well as by the lack of bodily strength. Something of all that I have gone through myself. I have never known perfect health, and I have known what it was to have close ties making me feel the wants of others as my own and to have very little money by which these wants could be met. Before that, I was too proud and ambitious to write: I did not believe that I could do anything fine, and I did not choose to do anything of that mediocre sort which I despised when it was done by others. I began, however, by a sort of writing which had no great glory belonging to it, but which I felt certain I could do faithfully and well. This resolve to work at what did not gratify my ambition, and to care only that I worked faithfully, was equivalent to the old phrase—"using the means of grace." Not long after that, I wrote fiction which has been thought a great deal of—but the satisfaction I have got out of it has not been exactly that of ambition. When we are young we say, "I should be proud if I could do that." Having done it, one finds oneself the reverse of proud.

I will say no more about myself except that you must not imagine my position to be at all like Romola's. I have the best of husbands, the most sympathetic of companions; indeed, I have more than my share of love in a world where so many are pining for it. Mr. Lewes, who cares supremely for science, is interested in what you say of your husband's labours; and he is so delighted when anything good or pretty comes to me that I think he is more grateful to you than I am for your generous, affectionate words. Yet I too am not insensible, but shall remain always yours in grateful memory

M. E. Lewes.

1 Romola: the isolated, unhappily married main character in one of Eliot's novels
2 Mr. Lewes: Eliot's common-law husband, a prominent philosopher
Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts one-third of the total essay section score.)

Carefully read the following passage from “Owls” by Mary Oliver. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Oliver’s style conveys the complexity of her response to nature.

When the great horned [owl] is in the trees its razor-tipped toes rasp the limb, flakes of bark fall through the air and land on my shoulders while I look up at it and listen to the heavy, crisp, breathy snapping of its hooked beak. The screech owl I can imagine on my wrist, also the delicate saw-whet that flies like a big soft moth down by Great Pond. And I can imagine sitting quietly before that luminous wanderer the snowy owl, and learning, from the white gleam of its feathers, something about the Arctic. But the great horned I can’t imagine in any such proximity—if one of those should touch me, it would be to the center of my life, and I must fall. They are the pure wild hunters of our world. They are swift and merciless upon the backs of rabbits, mice, voles, snakes, even skunks, even cats sitting in dusky yards, thinking peaceful thoughts. I have found the headless bodies of rabbits and bluejays, and known it was the great horned owl that did them in, taking the head only, for the owl has an insatiable craving for the taste of brains. I have walked with prudent caution down paths at twilight when the dogs were puppies. I know this bird. If it could, it would eat the whole world.

In the night, when the owl is less than exquisitely swift and perfect, the scream of the rabbit is terrible. But the scream of the owl, which is not of pain and hopelessness, and the fear of being plucked out of the world, but of the sheer rollicking glory of the death-bringer, is more terrible still. When I hear it resounding through the woods, and then the five black pellets of its song dropping like stones into the air, I know I am standing at the edge of the mystery, in which terror is naturally and abundantly part of life, part of even the most becalmed, intelligent, sunny life—as, for example, my own. The world where the owl is endlessly hungry and endlessly on the hunt is the world in which I live too. There is only one world.

Sometimes, while I have stood listening to the owl’s auguring song drifting through the trees, when it is ten degrees above nothing and life for any small creature is hard enough without that, I have found myself thinking of summer fields. Fields full of flowers—poppies or lupines. Or, here, fields where the roses hook into the dunes, and their increase is manyfold. All summer they are red and pink and white tents of softness and nectar, which wafts and hangs everywhere—a sweetness so palpable and excessive that, before it, I’m struck, I’m taken, I’m conquered, I’m washed into it, as though it was a river, full of dreaming and idleness—I drop to the sand, I can’t move; I am restless no more; I am replete, supine, finished, filled to the last edges with an immobilizing happiness. And is this not also terrible? Is this not also frightening? Are the roses not also—even as the owl is—excessive? Each flower is small and lovely, but in their sheer and silent abundance the roses become an immutable force, as though the work of the wild roses was to make sure that all of us who come wandering over the sand may be, for a while, struck to the heart and saturated with a simple happiness. Let the mind be teased by such stretches of the imagination, by such balance. Now I am cringing at the very sound of the owl’s dark wings opening over my head—not long ago I could do nothing but lounge on the sand and stare into the cities of the roses.

Carefully read the following passage by Susan Sontag. Then write an essay in which you support, refute, or qualify Sontag’s claim that photography limits our understanding of the world. Use appropriate evidence to develop your argument.

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. Of course, photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past: for example, Jacob Riis’s images of New York squalor in the 1880’s are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian. Nevertheless, the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. As Brecht points out, a photograph of the Krupp works* reveals virtually nothing about that organization. In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.

The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom. . . . The very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness. The omnipresence of photographs has an incalculable effect on our ethical sensibility. By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is. Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution.

* Krupp: a German weapons manufacturing firm that was instrumental in the Nazi rearmament effort of the 1930’s.

—On Photography, 1977