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Postmodernism and poststructuralism have deconstructed but not demolished the Christian or liberal humanist ideas of the self on which this project is based – the unique, autonomous individual responsible for his or her own acts. We continue to value novels, especially novels in the classic realist tradition, for the light they throw on human motivation.

Motivation in a novel like *Middlemarch* is a code of *causality*. It aims to convince us that the characters act as they do not simply because it suits the interests of the plot (though it usually does, of course: half the plot of *Middlemarch* would collapse if Lydgate did not call on Rosamond Vincy in Chapter 31) but because a combination of factors, some internal, some external, plausibly cause them to do so. Motivation in the realist novel tends to be, in Freudian language, “overdetermined”, that is to say, any given action is the product of several drives or conflicts derived from more than one level of the personality; whereas in folk-tale or traditional romance a single cause suffices to explain behaviour – the hero is always courageous because he is the hero, the witch is always malevolent because she is a witch, etc. etc. Lydgate has several reasons for calling on Rosamond Vincy, some pragmatic, some ego-gratifying, some self-deceiving, some subconscious.

The context of this passage is as follows: Lydgate is a talented and ambitious young doctor with a promising medical career ahead of him when he comes to the provincial town of Middlemarch in the mid-1830s. There he meets and enjoys the company of Rosamond Vincy, the attractive but rather shallow-minded daughter of a prosperous merchant. To Rosamond, Lydgate is the most eligible man ever likely to appear on her horizons, and she soon considers herself to be in love with him. Her aunt, Mrs Bulstrode, warns Lydgate that his attentions to Rosamond may be interpreted as courtship. Lydgate, who has no wish to hamper his medical career with the responsibilities of marriage, immediately stops visiting the Vincys. But, after ten days' abstention, he calls to deliver a message.

George Eliot does not expose the secret motives of her characters with the ironic detachment of Arnold Bennett in the passage I discussed in the previous section, but in a more speculative and

On the eleventh day, however, Lydgate when leaving Stone Court was requested by Mrs Vincy to let her husband know that there was a marked change in Mr Featherstone's health, and that she wished him to come to Stone Court on that day. Now Lydgate might have called at the warehouse, or might have written a message on a leaf of his pocket-book and left it at the door. Yet these simple devices apparently did not occur to him, from which we may conclude that he had no strong objection to calling at the house at an hour when Mr Vincy was not at home, and leaving the message with Miss Vincy. A man may, from various motives, decline to give his company, but perhaps not even a sage would be gratified that nobody missed him. It would be a graceful, easy way of piecing on the new habits to the old, to have a few playful words with Rosamond about his resistance to dissipation, and his firm resolve to take long fasts even from sweet sounds. It must be confessed, also, that momentary speculations as to all the possible grounds for Mrs Bulstrode's hints had managed to get woven like slight clinging hairs into the more substantial web of his thoughts.

GEORGE ELIOT *Middlemarch* (1871-2)

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE do we hope to derive from reading novels, which tell us stories we know are not “true”? One traditional answer to that question is: knowledge of the human heart, or mind. The novelist has an intimate access to the secret thoughts of her characters denied to the historian, the biographer or even the psychoanalyst. The novel, therefore, can offer us more or less convincing models of how and why people act as they do.

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sympathetic fashion. At least, she is sympathetic to Lydgate. It has been often noted that George Eliot is rather less tolerant of beautiful, self-regarding women like Rosamond. In the paragraph immediately preceding the one I have quoted, Rosamond's anxiety about Lydgate's ten-day absence is rather dismissively summarized as follows:

Any one who imagines ten days too short a time – not for falling into leanness, lightness, or other measurable effects of passion, but – for the whole spiritual circuit of alarmed conjecture and disappointment, is ignorant of what can go on in the elegant leisure of a young lady's mind.

"Elegant leisure" has a tone of tart disparagement that tends to devalue Rosamond's emotional stress. The analysis of Lydgate's motives is less summary, and more sympathetic, in style.

Instead of simply stating that Lydgate rejected other possible means of delivering his message because he wanted to see Rosamond, the authorial voice notes that "these simple devices apparently did not occur to him, from which we may conclude that he had no strong objections to calling at the house at an hour when Mr Vincy was not at home, and leaving the message with Miss Vincy." By this roundabout phrasing, George Eliot imitates both the way we have to infer motives from behaviour in real life, and the way we conceal our true motives even from ourselves. There is irony here, but it is humorous and humane. "Perhaps not even a sage would be gratified that nobody missed him," identifies Lydgate's vanity as a universal failing. The discourse then slips into free indirect style to show Lydgate's mental rehearsal of the note he intends to strike with Rosamond: a "graceful, easy . . . playful" signalling of his lack of serious intentions towards her. The last sentence of the paragraph is authorial, and plumbs the deepest level of Lydgate's motivation for calling on Rosamond: he is fascinated and flattered by the suggestion that she may have fallen in love with him, though he has hardly admitted this to himself. The image of the web which George Eliot uses to express this idea was a favourite one of hers, perhaps because it suggested the complexity and interconnectedness of human experience.

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Lydgate's vanity and curiosity are his undoing. What happens is that Rosamond, normally so poised and self-controlled, reacts to Lydgate's sudden, unexpected reappearance with barely controlled emotion, and their meeting takes a quite different turn from the one he had planned. Both parties are surprised into natural, spontaneous behaviour which, in that society, at that time, has momentous consequences. Rosamond, in her perturbation, drops a "piece of trivial chain-work" which she has in her hands. Lydgate stoops to pick it up, and as he rises to his feet notices the tears welling irrepressibly in her eyes. "That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather touch: it shook flirtation into love," says the narrator. Within a few minutes Lydgate has taken Rosamond in his arms and is an engaged man. "He did not know where the chain went." Symbolically, it has gone round his neck: his professional future is mortgaged to a bourgeois marriage which will bring him little happiness and no fulfilment. It is one of the most brilliantly rendered "love-scenes" in English fiction; and it succeeds partly because Lydgate's motives for exposing himself to Rosamond's powerful sexual allure are so subtly and convincingly established beforehand.