

The marriages of Rosamonds

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Abstract. I compare Rosamond's relationship with her husband in *Middlemarch* with Rosamond's marital relationship in L.A.G. Strong's short story "The Seal." I interpret the latter fiction as addressing the unpleasant question: what sort of decent man can suppress Rosamond?

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A striking feature of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is the depiction of Rosamond Vincy's relationship with her husband, Tertius Lydgate. Below I compare the Rosamond of this novel, and her marital relationship, with a Rosamond who seems much the same – who appears in a very short fiction, by L.A.G. Strong.

Rosamond is a person with techniques for dominating over her family members. We are told:

Apart from his dinners and his coursing, Mr. Vincy, blustering as he was, had as little of his own way as if he had been a prime minister: the force of circumstances was easily too much for him, as it is for most pleasure-loving florid men; and the circumstance called Rosamond was particularly forcible by means of that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock. (1871-2: chapter 36)

Rosamond applies her techniques of domination in her marriage, for example:

When Lydgate was taking part in the conversation, she never looked towards him any more than if she had been a sculptured Psyche modelled to look

another way: and when, after being called out for an hour or two, he re-entered the room, she seemed unconscious of the fact, which eighteen months before would have had the effect of a numeral before ciphers. In reality, however, she was intensely aware of Lydgate's voice and movements; and her pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness was a studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety.

(1871-2: chapter 63)

Lydgate's energies are drained by his tensions with Rosamond over various matters, and how she reacts. Prior to and in the early period of his marriage, he seems to have some sexist preconceptions about the ideal role of woman (1871-2: 58); nevertheless, he seems a basically decent person, especially taking into account the times.

In L.A.G. Strong's 1928 story "The Seal," there is a Rosamond as well, and she is much like the Rosamond of *Middlemarch*, if not simply the same. But she is married to a different sort of man in this story:

George's personality was so loud—well, so vigorous—that one often needed a good while alone to let his echoes die away. It was lovely to have him interested in what one did, and he took a real, intelligent interest: yet the result was rather like his trick of taking up and continuing, in a hearty baritone, the tune she was humming quietly to herself as she did the housework. (1928: 127)

Her quieter tastes are not taken into account. I take the story to be answering the unpleasant question: what sort of decent man can succeed in suppressing Rosamond? George too seems basically decent. In response to various things, he loudly says, "By Jove, Rosamond," and that does some of the suppressive work.

The story is three pages long, which contrasts with the considerable length of *Middlemarch*. That may well be conveying that there is not much to say about this particular marriage, or it may be a criticism: the topic of a difficult marriage can in general be dealt with more swiftly than Eliot's novel does.

Rosamond, in the short fiction, meets a seal by the beach, urging it not to go away, and singing to it. As George comes along to join her, the seal flees the scene. This is what George says:

“By Jove,” bellowed George excitedly, “there goes a seal—look, Rosamond—see him?—There he goes—there!—By Jove, a whopper!” (1928: 128)

Ruining her quiet experiences with his ununderstanding loudness again. It is difficult to believe he does not really understand. He is not that nice then, but perhaps he regards the alternatives as even worse. What human companion is Rosamond suited to, if not Lydgate and by-Joving George? Anyway, I find it difficult to believe the latter's way of interacting can be sustained in such close relations. What we are presented with seems less believable than *Middlemarch* and a suitable subject for more realistic treatment.

References

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