

# Meaning/fulness

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GISELE Bündchen has that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by expensive dress. Or so one assumes, given Bündchen's longtime status as one of the world's top supermodels. By contrast, of course, "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress," as we learn in the first sentence of the first chapter of *Middlemarch* (1872).<sup>1</sup> That paragraph goes on to identify an interest in fashionable clothing as the antithesis of Dorothea Brooke's values and commitments: "to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solicitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam"; "she could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery" (8). Nonetheless, these two women have more in common than their beauty: the world-famous Victoria's Secret model and the model secret Victorian (exemplar, per the novel's final sentence, of "the number who lived faithfully a hidden life") have surprisingly similar or at least similar-sounding aspirations (825). Thus, the young Dorothea's most profound desire is, as she puts it, to live a life in which "Every-day things with us would mean the greatest things" (28); Bündchen, as she explains in her autobiography, *Lessons: My Path to a Meaningful Life*, cares most about what will "[open] the doors to a bigger, more meaningful life" and "make my own life better by giving it deeper meaning."<sup>2</sup>

Similarity is not identity, however, and the differences between these statements are as significant as what they share. Most revealing is the contrast between the patness of Bündchen's assertions and the ambiguity and awkwardness of Dorothea's exclamation. Invocations of meaning and meaningfulness are ubiquitous in contemporary culture, even if (or because) they often have an unexamined quality or vagueness to them. Paradoxically, then, Bündchen's words may be vacuous, but we know what she means. But what, exactly, is Dorothea trying to say

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about the life she envisions with Edward Casaubon? Out of context, it might seem that she looks forward to a transvaluation of her values whereby the intrinsic meaningfulness of “every-day things” themselves would be newly affirmed—and, in fact, this is arguably the “lesson” (à la Bündchen) the novel ultimately, if ambivalently, endorses. In context, however, the one thing that is clear is that this is not what Dorothea means. But is she suggesting that things she views as “trivial” will take on importance because of the project they subserve, or is she saying something quite different—that her days will be filled with the activities that have intrinsic value to her as the components of “a grand life” (28)?

Dorothea’s confusing formulation no doubt reflects her own youthful confusion. However, it also reflects the fact that the discourse of meaningfulness is emerging here but is not yet fully formed (let alone trite). It is not merely that the Victorians themselves would have been unlikely to include *meaningful* or *meaningfulness* in a compilation of keywords—*meaningfulness* does not appear in their compilation of *all* words, the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the relevant section of which was published in 1906. Even the sense of *meaning* most pertinent here, as “Something which gives one a sense of purpose, value, etc., esp. of a metaphysical or spiritual kind; the (perceived) purpose of existence or of a person’s life,” was not added until the current, third edition.<sup>3</sup> As far as we and the *OED* know, the phrase “the meaning of life,” so often taken to name an age-old, fundamental human concern, dates in English only to the 1834 serial publication of Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*—“Our Life is compassed round with Necessity; yet is the meaning of Life itself no other than Freedom”<sup>4</sup>—and its usage only took off in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, spurred by the translation of Leo Tolstoy’s *Confessions*.<sup>5</sup> Tellingly, when “meaningful” in the relevant (that is, not strictly semantic) sense appears in Olive Schreiner’s 1883 *Story of an African Farm*, it is treated as a neologism: “And so it comes to pass in time, that the earth ceases for us to be a weltering chaos. . . . Nothing is despicable—all is meaning-full; nothing is small—all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not.”<sup>6</sup>

Recognition of the novelty of meaning-talk in the nineteenth century should encourage us to attend more closely to its deployment and development, and to consider its affordances. It should also lead us to consider anew meaning-talk *about* the nineteenth century—or indeed about modernity writ large, which is often seen as emerging or consolidating in the nineteenth century. Foremost among these sweeping

accounts is the story of disenchantment and secularization most closely associated with Max Weber and, for students of the novel, Georg Lukács; Charles Taylor is its most recent, influential exponent.<sup>7</sup> According to this model, the world used to be saturated in (something we now call) meaning, but with the decline of religious belief in the West, the world came to seem devoid of meaning, or to hold only that meaning which people imposed or projected onto it. One consequence of this development is that literature, or art more broadly, takes on new importance as a site of meaning/fulness.

Proponents of this model tend not to ask why, if this is the case, there is so little talk of meaning before the nineteenth century. When this conundrum is recognized, the more or less explicit answer seems to be that you don't miss your water till the well runs dry: talk of meaning only takes off when meaning becomes scarce, elusive, a problem. And it is true that talk of meaning/fulness is frequently talk of the threat or felt sense of meaninglessness (also a Victorian coinage, per the *OED*). One might wonder instead, however, if what's new in the nineteenth century is not the absence of meaning but the very concepts of meaning and/or meaningfulness, with a sense of fragility baked into the concepts. Moreover, if the desire for meaning does arise in reaction to some loss, one might still ask if that which is desired or valued is in fact the same thing as that which has been lost? And why and with what effects is this the lexicon with which that reaction is articulated? Further scholarship is needed to help us better understand what is meant, and what is at stake, when the Victorians talk about meaning/fulness, and when we do as well.<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1872; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 7. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. Gisele Bündchen, *Lessons: My Path to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 29, 20.
3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "meaning, n.2."
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "meaning, n.2."
5. For a helpful account of the transnational, multilingual spread of this phrase in the nineteenth century, see Steven Cassedy, "Dostoevsky and the Meaning of 'the Meaning of Life,'" in *Dostoevsky beyond Dostoevsky*:

- Science, Religion, Philosophy*, edited by Svetlana Evdokimova and Vladimir Golstein (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 111–28.
6. Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118.
  7. See Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, translated by Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2020); Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
  8. One path forward might be to build on the account of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who argues that in the West a “meaning-culture” has replaced an earlier “presence-culture.” Gumbrecht is alert to both the benefits and costs of this replacement, but he provides little more than a highly suggestive sketch. See Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). I am grateful to Andrew H. Miller for this reference.

