HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Madame Bovary (1857)

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)

OVERVIEW

Aesthetic of the great work*: Literary Strategies and Synergies*

A setting

Our trips into the literature and culture of nineteenth century France have taken us already into many corners of the mind we have come to associate with the historical condition. May we note this, saying that in earlier periods of the human adventure, the sense of being in such a condition was less vivid or supported than it is at our time? Think, if only for that instance, of the presence to us not only of the 'great historical monuments' but of the simple detritus which now abundantly covers both the earth's surface and the surface of the floor of the ocean. (That too is part of our very historic existence on the planet. We have deposited ourselves in time and cannot easily remove ourselves as traces.) In our texts—to return to literature-- we reflect our sensitivity to how we position ourselves in time. Think for example of the sense of time passing that pervades a few of the sample texts we have viewed. Take the romantic pair, Paul and Virginie, in their absence—temporal and physical-- from one another, Virginie lives the very foreign Parisian lifestyle while Paul languishes in Mauritius, putting in time (She is letting time sweep her along, while Paul is 'putting in time.' Virginie and Paul live from different standpoints the dense Romantic presence of time. (Other ages have, of course, their own fashions of imputing or characterizing the presence and passage of time: think of the A*eneid's haec olim meminisse iuvabit* or, much later, Dante's *nessun maggior dolore che, nella miseria, ricordarse del tempo felice,* where the recall of the past is deeply bittersweet. The temporality central to Constant's Adolphe is far more centralized than that which is direction giving in *Paul et Virginie.* Adolphe himself is a growing awareness of the condition of his love, and of the complexities of the expression of that love, while Paul et Virginie construct between them a diminishing temporal parallelogram in which as one branch grows the other shrinks. Their temporal interrelations grow and shrink correspondingly. The temporal interrelations governing the emotional lives of Carmen and her ardent lover are susceptible to the volatility of events; passion and servility intersect. It is only when the rubber band of human relations is stretched too far that the protagonist is destroyed and the tension evaporates from Merimee's text.

Literature becomes a barometer of its own on whose sensitive scales we can measure our temporal location and setting. To write—in particular what we now call a fiction—is to find corporeal yourself and to measure the world in which you are located. The fiction of the novel, it might in fact be said, is like the work of the geometer or architect, for it involves fore planning as well as accuracy in the disposition of the elements of one's imagination. Contrary to many versions of the term imagination, that faculty promotes in us the challenge of hard labor in the mind. (The great work of fiction must encompass a world through imagination as well as transform that world; we use this transformative notion of Coleridge here to reach into an inventive mother lode which was coming under wide exploitation, at just the time that Flaubert was sketching out his plans for The French mind, Cartesian at its best, was bringing together imagination and exactitude. It was not a coincidence that Flaubert found at his disposition a culture in which the sentiments of the heart were offering themselves to ordinary folk, one might say to the prototypes of regular soap opera watchers, as we might have wanted to put it in the old days of the author's youth. Not only was a proto middle class, with its middle class tastes, forming in Flaubert's France, but the privileges pertinent to the older versions of a class system were disappearing.

Grasping a Life

To begin in language to depict another's life is a much more awesome effort than we easily imagine. Think of some of the preliminary challenges. Every life has both an inside and an outside. (I cannot escape being the self-awareness of that condition, even as I position myself to grasp at another's life. I

am ‘taken in advance by my own condition. However that occlusion may cost, in personal maloptics there seems no privileged access, from one’s unique personal state of being into another’s life. The consequence in text or portraiture is a mixed product in which the novelist—portraitist resembles what he is, blended.) It is ‘unrealistic’ to expect any more camera like result than that, from the process of portraiture. We have already used the term ‘grasping,’ in suggesting the voracity of the writer or painter, in closing with the other. To write an extended narrative, like Flaubert’s, is to render oneself, over a substantial period of time, part of the intrication that binds the creative mind to what it is grasping. Once the initial bind has been established—once I, M. Flaubert, have in part become a moving contributory element in the dynamic other of my creation, who is at the same time the creator of me, it will be fitting to anatomize what we call plot.

Greatness in Literature

Is there any basis, in what precedes, for attributing greatness to *Madame Bovary*, or is making that claim simply puffery and verbiage. Masterpieces are doubtless firm and unassailable structures. *Madame Bovary* smells of the confidence of its author. What could have been told differently in Flaubert’s tale? The tale itself, as it carries us on through the seemingly unavoidable sequence of provincial dreams and infatuations, to the tragic conclusion around a bottle of poison, the tale could have been modified—another affair here or there, more psycho neurotic problems plaguing Madame, but tnese niceties would have cluttered what Flaubert has designed as one of the world’s least amendable texts.

What then is a great novel? A great novel, or in particular a great tragedy, like Madame Bovary? It is a work which is grippingly human, which, as Aristotle puts it in the Poetics, works through the emotions of pity and awe to provoke the cleansing of those emotions, to purify the mind. Does it matter that Mme Bovary was a dream filled country girl, a byproduct of early industrialized society in which traces enough of the old aristocratic world survived, to serve as nostalgia and dream material? That she was not of the nobility, or her dreams plunged in some archaic nobility was exactly the point about Madame Bovary. It little matters that Mme Bovary will never fall victim to inverted destiny, in the fashion of that Oedipus whom Aristotle chooses, as his model of the meaningful culture hero. Oedipus takes a serious fall, with grave consequences for an entire state, but Emma Bovary, while falling as deeply as her imagination will let her, has no grand message to carry, unless it is that we should dream carefully.

Plot

The master novelist, Faubert, stands here before what he is portraying, the very picture, as we say, of French provincial longing, dreams, naivete, innocence and dangerous vulnerability. It is all there in it. That’s the portrait in Flaubert’ mind, but that’s also the portrait which, in order to become part of a fiction--fingo, fingere—to depict—must be enacted. Madame Bovary has to do something, has to be put in action. It is easy enough to say that Flaubert must have ‘had’ his entire text in mind from the start. (Were that to be said, the question would immediately follow, what does ‘from the start ‘mean’? Is there a point at which a tale to be is a concretion a certain magnitude firmer than it had appeared to be, a point at which a plot seems to be jelling?) It is only possible to impute this kind of jelling process to what has already seen the light of imagination’s day, and once that has occurred we are unlikely to feel that there was ever a time when the novel did not exist. A great fiction, therefore, will be one which the constituent parts will seem always and everywhere to have been so coordinated as they appear at any given moment of the sampling of the whole.

Flaubert’s first published novel Ma*dame Bovary*, places his work squarely at the point where two literary nomenclatures—romanticism and realism--begin to coincide. We have seen areas of overlap, between the two historical perspectives. Take the romantic fictional pair, Paul and Virginie, in their absence—temporal and physical-- from one another. Virginie is living the very foreign Parisian lifestyle while Paul languishes in Mauritius, putting in time. Virginie and Paul live from different standpoints the dense Romantic presence of time. The reality of the present passage of time: is also densely portrayed. Reality and romance have started to intertwine, as they will later do *in Madame Bovary*, where a highly romanticized, beautiful but empty, directionless but aspiring middle class lady wanders emptily through middle class time until in the end it destroys her.

STORY

Early Marriage Emma is a modest version of the new middle class, still, in its values, conservative and religious. Her marriage will speak to many young couples of the age. In the course of her marital life she is subject to rare reversions to the religious mode of her background—she was after all convent educated—and to conspicuous bouts of affection toward the stodgy Charles. These affectionate but rare periods tend to coincide with moments when Charles acquires a slightly more elevated role in the hierarchy of o*fficiers de sante*, the modest role attained by Charles in the then dominant public health system of France. The converse of these points forces itself on us and Emma when Charles undertakes and badly botches a fieldside leg operation. Emma's scorn for him is boundless. The fact about Charles is that although he aspired to a position on the tertiary rungs of the physicians' professions, his skill level confined him to plebeian activities and functions.

Depression While Charles and Emma cooked up a very pedestrian marriage—in the course of which Emma bore a baby girl—to whom she felt alternately loving and indifferent—Emma began to fall prey to depression. There might be several explanations for this state of mind. We are at a moment in medical history when French psychiatry was making noteworthy analytical advances, and was much more prepared, than in the past, to analyze such issues as postpartum depression.

Ennui At the time of Emma's depression France found itself in the grips of what was getting called e*nnui*, a term of shifting meanings which initially met the standards for the English equivalent of boredom, but which advanced quickly to assume richer meanings, and indeed to describe a widespread female malaise. Ennui increased, we can rapidly surmise, with the actual expansion of leisure and entertainment in a world growingly richer in those commodities. Ennui, at the historical moment where we are tracking It, is not yet a commodity but a symptom of commodification. By the time the symptom has truly invaded the family we begin to see the raw materials of marital breakdown.

Boredom The ingredients of such breakdown are in place by the time Emma and Charles have begun to settle in the larger market town of Yonville, one of the semi industrialized cities growing up on the periphery of Paris. Emma is a housewife with a wandering eye, who has just come to terms with the mediocrity or downright incompetence of her husband Charles. It seems inevitable that Emma will grow fatally tired of Charles as she does. Her affairs begin at this point, and continue in their romantic phase as long as the market will bear it. That is, as long as Emma can afford to keep up her end of the high life. (This financial juggling act is putting Emma under high pressure. Without realizing it she is accumulating debts for fine jewelry and gowns.)

Affairs She meets the Vicomte at a ball; she is moving now in far more elegant circles than she had in the old days, early in her marriage to Charles. The vicomte is that surviving rarity, a descendant of the old aristocracy, and one can imagine how easily Emma was conquered by this genuine nobility. One can imagine the pleasure it gave this gent, to swirl over the dance floor with this charming young nothing. The same kind of festive ball brought Emma close to a far livelier young man, Leon Dupuis, who drew Emma closely in toward his genuine love of the arts. The two of them could be seen arm in arm in every gallery in the city. Emma exercised a wide taste in men, provided they elevated her sense of her own value. The most self-elevating of Emma's efforts to surmount her own fear of mediocrity is her affair with the gallant Rodolphe, who surpasses her dreams of personal grandeur, but in her extremities abandons her like a stray animal.

Husband and Wife die A gruesome finale awaits not only Emma but all those who are close to her, her husband and daughter. Emma herself, finally aware that she has been abandoned by all her lovers, steals a vial of arsenic from the local pharmacist, and drinks it before succumbing to hours of agonizing death. After his wife's death her husband Charles continues to believe in her—arranges a formal funeral—until he discovers a shoe box full of Emma's letters from her lovers. Not long after, Charles dies of grief, and daughter Berthe is sent away to work in a cotton mill. The dead end story ends on a particularly dark note.

Absurd Award The cynical local pharmacist, M. Homais, who has contributed greatly to the financial woes of Charles and Emma, receives, from the state, the award of the Legion d'honneur, a high local tribute for service to his community. Emma's foolish dreams end up in the phony honor awarded to

the most cynical of Emma's legatees. The whole house of cards, of the present fiction, collapses on Emma at once. The bitter finale to the novel plays deeply into the scorn of Flaubert for the new growing class of the bourgeoisie, to whose self-interested hypocrisy he regularly contrasts the values of earlier centuries. In the absurd irony of his undeserved award, M. Homais comes to represent the false currency of his age, while the life of Emma herself is a monument to fake dreams and ignorant illusions.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EMMA BOVARY

Emma is a country girl born of simple parents, who themselves were brought up into the virtues of still pretty dominant 19th century Catholicism. Emma was convent- educated, therefore disciplined to listen and believe. Her parents' roots being basically agricultural, she was ready to believe that the male was the primary definer of a culture and of its dreams.

Susceptibility It was of course deep in Emma's neuro psychic makeup, to accord herself to male dominance. As a female child of the male-values Catholic system, Emma was hyper-sensitive to those values, and thus needed little prompting—not even romance —to make the expected marital step into the hands of the man her family suggested sa a mate. Charles Bovary was the natural pick for Emma, and she went with the flow, unable to evaluate his poor credentials, or to realize the difference between an 'officier de sante,' a public health official, which he was, and a 'real doctor.' When, later, it comes to her husband setting a farm worker's broken leg, Emma learns the bitter truth.

Aspirations and Dreams Emma was all fancies in her head. She never emerged from an adolescent romanticism. Once she got started on a sequence of love affairs, she was not to be stopped. One romance followed another—Leon, Rodolphe, the Marquis—each lover satisfying a new dimension of her tastes or needs. As Charles makes no sign of noticing, Emma continually ups the ante, until finally she brings disaster onto herself.

Desperation Emma's search for fantasy satisfaction finally leads to her self-destruction. Driven byher search for fine gowns and jewelry she drives herself bankrupt, cannot pay her debts, and swallows enough arsenic to kill herself. Charles is the last to know what has hit him, but when he finds out he dies of grief.

Parallel The moment, in a woman's life, between virginity and 'knowledge' is universal, and nowhere more intensely depicted than in Dante's Divine Comedy, in the first taste of love between Paolo and Francesca.

CHARLES BOVARY

Charles Bovary descended from a farm family long native to the growing periphery around Paris, He was from the outset of mediocre intelligence, and mediocre ambition, gladly following his parents' marital suggestions. When an attractive and naïve girl—her head full of romantic fantasies,--came his way, he was bowled over, and in fact remained true to her longer than any other figure in the novel.

Love It would be cruel to say of Charles Bovary that he does not love Emma. He is profoundly separate from Emma in sensibility and understanding. He has none of her need for a fantasy life that will fulfil inner longings. It would be misleading to say that Emma and Charles could ever be in love with one another.

Weakness When we do see Charles Bovary putting himself forward, in the real world, it is in the effort to perform a medical experiment on a young farm lad who has broken his leg. The experiment is botched, for which Emma feels total scorn for her husband.

Doggedness Even after Emma's death, Charles refuses to believe how much and how often she has betrayed him. The only evidence that overwhelms him is the discovery of a shoebox full of letters to Emma from her lovers. Upon seeing it, Charles dies of grief.

Parallel Menelaus, husband of Helen, who bore the responsibility for the Trojan War, continues to conduct a day by day business as usual relation to his wife even long after the war. .Menelaus is Charles.

THEMES

Fantasy. Fantasy is a release of the mind into openings and imaginations in which we discover spaces and insights otherwise not disclosed to us. Emma Bovary is highly susceptible to fantasies of glamor and romance.

Narcissism Emma is at times seriously involved with her daughter Berthe, but is for the most part more involved with herself and her plans. She is deeply narcissistic, concerned far more with herself than with her family or child. She never appears to treat her husband as an equal.

Self-abuse. Self-abuse is activity directed at harming oneself and at the pleasure such self-harm gives. Emma knows that with each new lover she takes on, she increases her burden of artifice and lies.

Contempt. Contempt is sharp scorn for the work or achievements of another. Emma wants to think the most of her husband—in the old days when she was forming her opinion of him. It was only when he botched his effort to set the farm boy's leg that she began to view her husband with scorn.

Dreams Dreams are releases of the mind, freeing often hidden or cloaked desires or dreads. Emma's inner life is composed of dreams, most of which she holds tightly to herself. Only in her sexual fantasies does she become the person she truly is.