



*The  
Nineteenth-Century  
Novel*

**IDENTITIES**

*edited by* **DENNIS WALDER**

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## The Nineteenth-Century Novel

This series comprises:

*The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Realisms*, edited by Delia da Sousa Correa

*The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Identities*, edited by Dennis Walder

*The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, edited by Stephen Regan

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# General introduction

*by Dennis Walder*

This book is the second of a series of two volumes and a critical reader, designed to encourage enjoyment and understanding of the nineteenth-century novel. The majority of the works discussed here are from England, but we have also included novels from France and the USA as an integral part of the project. The characteristic concerns and achievements of nineteenth-century novels are, we believe, displayed best by reading both deeply and widely – which means close study of a select group of individual texts, but also drawing those texts from more than one of the countries in which the novel flourished. The first volume, *Realisms*, explores novels by Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Émile Zola; the second, *Identities*, explores novels by Gustave Flaubert, Wilkie Collins, Henry James, Bram Stoker, Kate Chopin and Joseph Conrad.

The focus throughout is on writing in society: not only in the sense that every literary work inevitably draws from, as it also influences, its social environment; but also in the sense that novels in the nineteenth century saw themselves as particularly engaged with the events, circumstances, beliefs and attitudes of their time. Of all the literary genres, the novel is probably the best adapted to the representation and exploration of social change. This was especially evident immediately before and during the nineteenth century, when society was undergoing the massive and lasting change inaugurated by the ‘twin revolutions’ of the industrial revolution in England and the French Revolution. Our accounts of the novels discussed in this volume draw attention to their engagement with social attitudes as these have come to be discussed today, including the political discourses of class, gender and race.

The novel as a genre is of course defined by formal as well as by historical elements, and we concentrate also on the characteristic themes and issues articulated by the genre’s typical features – character, plot, image, setting, point of view and, indeed, all aspects of narrative function. We look at the novels in broadly chronological order according to publication, as a way of conveying a strong sense of their changing engagement with the times; but this linear narrative is interrupted in these volumes from time to time by thematic grouping, in order to clarify what strikes us as most worthy of discussion in relation to the specific novels chosen at any one point – the representation of rural life, for example, or of crime, or of the heroine, or the *fin de siècle*.

Novels would not exist but for their writers. However, the *survival* of novels depends on their writers less than on their critics, and on their critics less than on their readers – although there is a closer connection between the critical reception of novels and their composition and consumption than most readers are willing to credit. Hence, in the following chapters on the novels, our approach involves a strong awareness of the interrelatedness of writing, reading and criticism: by demonstrating how the novelists themselves became

increasingly self-conscious of what they were doing (notably Flaubert, Zola and James); by looking at some of the reviews and publishing statistics of the time; and by taking account of more recent developments in the study of the novel. The critical reader that accompanies these two volumes consequently contains a range of nineteenth-century primary material – essays by George Eliot, Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, for example – as well as examples of more recent critical approaches.

Among the latter, most readers will be aware of the impact of feminism on the writing and reception of recent fiction, and we aim to show how this has affected our understanding of nineteenth-century novels. Equally political, in the broadest sense, have been recent readings of nineteenth-century novels as participating in the discourses of empire, readings made possible by the rise of what has been called ‘post-colonial’ criticism. Indeed, we take it as part of our brief to alert you to many of the ways in which discourses outside the strictly ‘literary’ (such as the discourses of science) have been increasingly used to illuminate the reading and understanding of nineteenth-century novels.

We aim to show how various forms of narrative theory can help us to enjoy the ‘made-ness’ of fiction; it can also help us to analyse its technical effects. As critics such as Roland Barthes (1915–80) have shown, the novel is only one of many kinds of narrative, which can be looked at and compared with others, to the delight as well as to the occasional bemusement of readers. It is important to acknowledge the diversity and reach of narrative, as a cultural arena in which the nineteenth-century novels we look at have participated. The fluidity and openness of the genre should ensure that we do not rush towards a fixed idea of what it is about. We should, for example, be wary of unquestioningly taking the nineteenth-century novel as an exemplification of the ‘rise’ of a certain kind of ‘realist’ writing. It is our aim to suggest that there is more than one version of the development of the nineteenth-century novel, most obviously in the emergence of fantasy and romance as features which provide an alternative and sometimes subversive idea of the form. These competing strands are to be found in some of the more popular novels by Dickens (see *Realisms*), Collins or Stoker (see *Identities*). Awareness of previously less-respected subgenres has also contributed to the way we read the nineteenth-century novel in general.

Chapters 1 and 8 in *Realisms* and chapters 8 and 15 in *Identities* are designed to be read as part of the general context; the rest are designed to be read in conjunction with individual novels. At the beginning of each of these chapters, you will find that we have recommended a particular edition of each novel; thereafter page references are given to this edition. (For those who are not reading in this edition, a general chapter reference is given.) You will notice that the text is punctuated with questions in bold-face; these are signals for you to pause in your reading, either to consider general questions or to focus on a certain passage which is about to be discussed in detail. We strongly recommend that you engage in these mental exercises as and when the text suggests. The authors follow each question or set of questions in bold with a detailed discussion of those questions, often referring closely to the text, which it would be helpful to have open before you at the relevant passage. Such discussion then broadens out to consider other relevant topics or material. You will also discover

that the text will refer you to essays collected and excerpted in the critical reader, which you are invited to read and consider so that you can then engage with the discussion of the material that follows. The critical reader also provides materials, both contemporary and modern, which are not dealt with at length in the text; they will provide you with a wider library of some of the most important relevant materials within which to contextualize your novel-reading.

These volumes were conceived and prepared by the following team: Sue Asbee, Marilyn Brooks, Hazel Coleman (editor), Delia da Sousa Correa, Nicolette David, Julie Dickens (course manager), Simon Eliot, Alan Finch (editor), Jane Lea (picture researcher), Sebastian Mitchell, Valerie Pedlar, Lynda Prescott, Stephen Regan, Nora Tomlinson, Dennis Walder (chair) and Nicola Watson (deputy chair). Our thanks go to Rosemary Ashton (University College London), who advised on the early stages of this project, and to Jacques Berthoud (University of York) for his guidance throughout.

# **PART 1**

# Introduction to part 1

*by Dennis Walder*

In the first part of this volume, we focus upon three contrasting mid- to late nineteenth-century novels: Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856–7), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–1). As their titles suggest, these novels all feature women as central characters; in terms of origin, theme and technique, however, they are quite different. *Madame Bovary*, one of the great nineteenth-century novels of adultery, is also a scrupulous examination of the detailed texture of northern French provincial life and its constraints. Thick with realist detail, the novel none the less played a key role in promoting a recognizably modern form of impersonal narration, and in raising the status of the genre to the highest level. *The Woman in White*, on the other hand, was the first, and also arguably the greatest, of popular English 'sensation novels': it is a masterfully constructed tale in which mysterious midnight encounters, intrigue and crime all feature, and suspense is more important than everyday reality. *The Portrait of a Lady* deals with the disillusionment of a young American woman in Europe, while harking back to the conventions of English domestic fiction, where the search for a suitable husband is the main aim of the plot. In this novel, James develops a narrative method of undercurrent and implication that invites readers into profound reflection upon the complexity of one woman's situation.

Despite these obvious differences, all three novels, in one form or another, may be said to raise the issue of female identity. Most novels have to do with the nature of the self in relation to others; but taking into account the question of how the central female character is, so to speak, 'constructed' sheds fresh light on both the art of the novelist in the nineteenth century, and on the ways in which novels connect with prevailing beliefs, manners and social structures. The specific instability of female identity revealed by our readings of these novels leads to further questions about the coherence of the self in the novels discussed in part 2 of this volume – Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) – all of which probe the new ways in which fiction represented a growing sense of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of imagining a unified and coherent subject.

Our approach involves looking at these novels from a perspective that draws on recent thinking (including, most notably, feminist theory) about the relation of the novel to its psychological, social and ideological underpinnings. The increasing self-awareness of fiction from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century onwards seems to have coincided with an increased interest among certain writers in experimentation, as they engaged with contemporary realities in a more inward, or indirect, way. The growing understanding that social and historical realities cannot be written from an objective standpoint, but that writing necessarily reflects the position of the writer, led to a conception of fictional truths as a function of the 'point of view' of the imagining consciousness. This is most obvious, perhaps, in the theorization of his practice

by James, who can be seen as the founder of modern novel-criticism in English. It was the French novelists of the nineteenth century Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola who developed the most sophisticated theory of the novel, especially in terms of the debates about realism. But it was James's prefaces and reviews (many of which invoked these novelists) that had the greatest impact upon Anglo-American novel-criticism. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that the writings of novelists such as Virginia Woolf (in the *Common Reader* volumes of the 1920s and 1930s and in *A Room of One's Own*, 1929), E.M. Forster (in *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927) and D.H. Lawrence (in *Phoenix*, 1936) created a broader and more diversified criticism.

The continuing influence of James's views was evident in the work of F.R. Leavis, who adopted the Jamesian criterion of 'felt life' (James, [1880–1] 1995; preface; p.7) as a watchword, while developing a highly selective canon of novels and novelists as the 'central' or 'great' tradition. In *The Great Tradition* ([1948] 1962), Leavis insisted that the great English novelists were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, on the grounds that their work made the most profound contribution to our awareness of the 'possibilities of life'. Leavis went on to find the high moral seriousness he attributed to these novelists in the work of D.H. Lawrence, but it was not until 1970 that (in part under the influence of his wife, Q.D. Leavis) he included the work of Charles Dickens in similar terms. Opposition to what was identified as the 'Leavis position', and in particular to his anti-theoretical, highly judgmental and exclusive approach, has grown apace; it has been attacked or, increasingly, ignored, by both structuralists and post-structuralists, on the one hand, and Marxist and feminist critics, on the other. One of the dangers of this development has been to encourage the idea that nothing important was said before the 1960s or 1970s, when the new wave of literary theory arose – or, indeed, before the 1980s or 1990s, when further exciting (and often bewildering) new approaches captured the attention of academics and students, if not writers and reviewers. These approaches – new historicism, cultural materialism, post-colonialism and lesbian/gay criticism (or Queer Theory) – represent new attempts to politicize critical endeavour, broadening yet further the reach of reading and understanding to incorporate texts and groups previously marginalized or underrated. This new inclusiveness has informed the chapters that follow.

The method we have adopted might best be described as 'eclectic-historicist', with the most obvious influence being that of feminist thinking about the novel. From the well-known opening of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), in which the novel's heroine is characterized in terms wittily contrasting her with the conventional romance figure, very many nineteenth-century novels concerned themselves with the construction of the female psyche, and the nature of readerly or generic expectations towards women. Nor was this concern only the preserve of female writers like Austen, Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot. The three novels we look at in detail in part 1 were all written by men, and it is likely that there was an element of self-identification with the central female figures in them: as Flaubert allegedly announced, 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.'

Why should it have been so important to these male writers to try to inhabit women? Was there something about the predicament of women at the time that made this seem a worthwhile ambition? Or was it that they felt the pressure of demand from a female readership to explore the choices confronting women? Or were there darker motives for this perhaps surprising choice of perspective? Hovering behind these heroines' struggles for fulfilment are death, madness and despair. Could no better end be imagined, in terms of the realities of the time?

Scholarship and criticism generated by the feminist movement has increased our awareness of these questions, and provided some of the means to answer them. To talk of 'the feminist movement' can be misleading, however, since there were, and are, so many strands of political, social and cultural – not to mention literary – criticism that might fall under that heading. For a start, it is important not to forget that some of the most powerful and influential voices challenging prevailing assumptions about the position of women emerged long before what we nowadays think of as the women's movement. These voices go back well beyond the 'second' wave of feminism, from the 1960s onwards, or beyond the suffragettes of the early twentieth century. Books such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the American Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* (1869), Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family* (1884), Eleanor Marx's *The Woman Question* (1886) and Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911) all offered classic critiques of women's subordination in Western societies. In the 1920s the impact of new thinking about the position of women upon attitudes towards writers and writing was strikingly apparent in the work of Rebecca West and, most famously, Virginia Woolf. In her influential book *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argued that economic and cultural factors, rather than innate disposition, prevented women from achieving the classic status of male writers. This conviction was shared by Simone De Beauvoir, whose monumental work *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; 'The Second Sex') explored the role of women in literature by scrutinizing their place in anthropology, biology, philosophy and religion. Her conclusion was that women have been defined in relation to men, who are seen as the 'Absolute', while women are always the 'Other'.

The social construction of women became a central tenet for the spate of writings which emerged in the late 1960s, arguing that women had been oppressed and exploited by the 'patriarchal order' of society, which defined them as 'Other'. Many writers, while urging the need to look at the historical and socioeconomic status of women, focused particularly upon literary sources (many, such as Germaine Greer and Elaine Showalter, were in any case trained literary critics). Looking back now, there seem to have been two main stages in the development of twentieth-century feminist criticism: the first was concerned with the critique of anti-woman, or misogynist, stereotyping in literature, examining the ways in which, for example, sexually assertive women were typically represented as angry harridans, while heroines had to be legless and tearful, rather than whole human beings; the second stage was concerned with the recovery of 'lost' writers and their works – such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, long ignored and out of print. De Beauvoir had addressed herself to

the way in which women had been represented by male writers such as Stendhal and Lawrence, although more recent French feminist criticism, such as that of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, has become obsessively interested in the psychoanalytic dimension, reading texts as tangles of repressed desire. English feminist criticism, while strongly influenced by developments in France, has had a more Marxist, or at least a more materialist, take on the oppression of women, and how this might be encountered in literary and other texts – examining the social (and particularly class) aspect of literary production, as well as the psychological. Terry Lovell's 1987 book, *Consuming Fiction*, for example, rewrote the standard account of 'the rise of the novel' (the title of Ian Watt's influential study of 1957) in both gender and class terms. The common objection was that far too often in this kind of criticism 'Marxism spoke and feminism listened' – as Ruth Robbins puts it in a helpful account, *Literary Feminisms* (2000, p.38). Hence, according to many American feminists, not only was it vital to restore the issue of gender (affecting men as well as women) to a central position, but questions of aesthetics, too, which might also be sidelined by an over-emphasis upon social formations. And, as African American critics such as bell hooks argued, race was all too easily overlooked as well.

Clearly, feminist criticism may involve many different and sometimes antagonistic viewpoints. An interest in the nineteenth-century novel has been one thing in common, doubtless because of its focus on intimate and domestic life, romance, courtship and marriage – not to mention the subversive impact of adultery and other forms of transgression, highlighted by books such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982) and Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992). The novels discussed in the first part of this volume place women in a central position; in part 2, only one of the three novels discussed, that by Kate Chopin, treats women characters as central. Yet a striking continuity can be perceived through all six novels: a preoccupation with the struggle to understand human desire, through sexuality, ownership and, on the largest scale, empire.

The manipulation of different generic forms within the novelistic narrative is one aspect of this struggle (using fantasy or dream to subvert the realist surface of the text, for example); another is the changing context of attitudes, beliefs and law. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the ideology of 'separate spheres', according to which men were economically active, striving and competitive, and women passive, domestic and nurturing, still seemed dominant in England, France and America: whereas by about 1900, strict gender divisions had cracked and broken in many places. Of course, fissures can be found wherever you look, in novels as in other areas of discourse: in *Jane Eyre* (1847) or in *Dombey and Son* (1846–8), for instance, class, gender and racial assumptions are at times extremely shaky. But there is strong evidence of (middle-class) women becoming more assertive and independent by the 1880s and 1890s (when their legal position had also improved), while some scientific as well as literary discourses were proposing more malleable conceptions of identity than had previously prevailed. If, as we suggest in what follows, writers

from James to Conrad were registering deep anxiety about the roles of women and men in society, this was in part because changing conceptions of gender were encouraging the development of new ways of thinking about the self in society.

The role of literary texts in such developments is not easy to discern. The novels we have chosen to study encourage us to think about, and question, the relationship between ourselves and fiction, and between fiction and reality. In the first place, though, they seduce us into reading them, into an intimacy with their worlds. One of the most distinctive features of what the Russian critic M.M. Bakhtin refers to as the 'novelistic zone' is the closeness between text and reader. As he says, 'in place of our tedious lives' many novels offer us 'a surrogate, true, but it is the surrogate of a fascinating and brilliant life. We can experience these adventures, identify with these heroes; such novels almost become a substitute for our own lives' (1982, p.32). Yet this special experience, absent from the reading of more distanced genres such as drama or poetry, brings a special danger: 'we might substitute for our own life an obsessive reading of novels, or dreams based on novelistic models' – in short, 'Bovaryism becomes possible' (ibid.).

'Bovaryism' is, of course, the ultimately fatal disease that overtakes the heroine of *Madame Bovary*: she identifies closely with the characters and settings of what she obsessively reads and enjoys, but also tries to bring her own life into line with her novelistic models. It is not just that as a fifteen-year-old in a convent Emma Bovary makes a 'cult' of Mary Stuart, and has 'an enthusiastic veneration for illustrious or ill-fated women' (Flaubert, [1856–7] 1992, 1.6; p.29) gleaned from Walter Scott and his like, but that, as a married woman, she prefers to stay in her room reading rather than attend to her domestic duties. Why is this? As the young apprentice Léon Dupuis puts it, 'From your chair you wander through the countries of your mind, and your thoughts, threading themselves into the fiction, play about with the details or rush along the track of the plot.' Finally, you 'melt into the characters; it seems as if your own heart is beating under their skin'. 'Oh, yes, that is true!' responds the enthusiastic Emma, herself the heroine of a novel, with whom we are encouraged to identify – if also to criticize (ibid., 2.2, p.56).

We start with Flaubert partly because he has written a novel that takes novel-reading itself as a central theme. It is not the first novel in which the nature of fiction is a key element – the earliest novels, from Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), were even more concerned with questioning themselves. Nor is it something new in the realist traditions of the nineteenth-century to find a fiction raising issues to do with fictional conventions. But not only did this novel bring a new self-consciousness about the art of fiction with it, it also brought a story in which, unlike in so many novels up until then, marriage did not conclude the narrative; rather, the disturbing, not to say disastrous, results of marriage concluded it. Flaubert took the domestic life of the middle classes – the main subject of nineteenth-century fiction – and pursued it with a clinical thoroughness that undermined the whole enterprise, preparing the way for a kind of novel-writing that was more interested in aesthetic pattern than in conveying 'life' in all its untidiness.

Flaubert's mould-breaking achievement would have far-reaching effects upon both the theory and practice of the novel in Europe. The most influential novelists as critics were French, Russian or – in the singular and most important case of Henry James – American. James's response to French novels, to Balzac, Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Flaubert, as well as to English and American novelists, makes clear the impact French writers had on the development of the novel as the dominant literary form of the nineteenth century. James also writes about and admires Ivan Turgenev, whom he read in French. But there has not been the critical interest we might expect in such admirable, influential and widely read novelists as Benito Pérez Galdós, Theodor Fontane, Gottfried Keller or Alessandro Manzoni – not to mention Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Only recently have (some) critics come to take account of the broad European tradition of fiction; and many still do not, blithely writing about the novel as if it only existed in English. Novelists such as James have always taken a broader view, and so do we.

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Madame Bovary*: a novel about nothing

*by Marilyn Brooks, with Nicola Watson*

On 14 November 1850, the twenty-nine-year-old Gustave Flaubert wrote to his close friend Louis Bouilhet that he was planning to write a novel about 'a young girl who dies a virgin and mystic after living with her father and mother in a small provincial town' (Flaubert, 1980, p.130). Four years later, in *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert was to retain that provincial setting but introduce a new heroine, an adulteress. On 16 January 1852, Flaubert wrote to his mistress, Louise Colet, describing his ambition to write a book 'about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible' (ibid., p.154). Yet that 'almost invisible' subject matter was so shocking that when the novel was serialized in the *Revue de Paris* in 1856, *Madame Bovary* leapt upon the world as a *succès de scandale*, and Flaubert was subsequently prosecuted for 'offense to public and religious morality and to good morals' (LaCapra, 1989, p.726).

In this chapter we'll be taking a look at this astonishing novel, examining both its famous 'strength of style' and its controversial subject matter – provincial ennui, bourgeois adultery and suicide. We'll be concentrating on how these two elements combine and ferment together to make one of the greatest and most influential of all heroines, Emma Bovary, who remains modern and shocking even today.

## **Le mot juste**

Flaubert was obsessively concerned with the precision of language, with the choice of 'le mot juste' ('the right word'). (While it is inevitably tricky to talk about stylistics while reading in translation, we have chosen Geoffrey Wall's translation of *Madame Bovary* because we feel that it approximates as closely as possible to the original's idiosyncratic punctuation, italicization and short paragraphs, and so preserves some of Flaubert's most interesting experimental effects.) Flaubert's legendary perfectionism meant that each piece of writing took months, even years, to complete. The writing of *Madame Bovary* was penitential, as he complained to Louise Colet on 24 April 1852:

Since last Monday I've put everything else aside, and have done nothing all week but sweat over my *Bovary*, disgruntled at making such slow progress. I've

now reached my ball, which I will begin Monday. I hope that may go better. Since you last saw me I've written 25 pages in all (25 pages in six weeks). They were rough going. Tomorrow I shall read them to Bouilhet, for I've gone over them so much myself, copied them, changed them, shuffled them, that for the time being I see them very confusedly. But I think they will stand up. You speak of your discouragements: if you could see mine! Sometimes I don't understand why my arms don't drop from my body with fatigue, why my brain doesn't melt away.

(Flaubert, 1980, p.158)

The novel took five years to complete, and so much cutting, rewriting and yet more cutting took place that the novel has been called 'an exercise in amputation' (Cave, 1994, p.viii). It seems that Flaubert's difficulties with *Madame Bovary* were particularly acute as a result of his deeply felt disgust for the pettiness of his characters and the banal world of provincial Tostes and Yonville they inhabited, a social background with which Flaubert was intimately familiar, he himself having been brought up in bourgeois comfort and respectability in Rouen. (There is also some evidence to suggest that he was reworking a good deal of painful biographical material within the novel: his relationship with his father, a doctor, for one, and with his mistress Louise Colet, for another.) Fretting in September the same year over how to represent a world of cliché and commonplace in close-up, and how to produce fine writing at one and the same time, he writes: 'Yet how can one produce well-written dialogue about trivialities? But it has to be done ...' (quoted in Allott, 1959, p.292). A week later, he confessed, 'I could weep sometimes, I feel so helpless' (ibid.). The following year had its depressing patches too:

*Bovary* is driving me mad! I'm coming to the conclusion that it *can't be written*. I have to make up a conversation between my young woman and a priest, a vulgar, stupid conversation, and because the matter is so commonplace the language must be appropriate ... But honestly, there are times when I could be almost *physically* sick, the stuff's so low.

(quoted in Allott, 1959, pp.293)

Although the subtitle of *Madame Bovary*, 'Mœurs de province' ('Provincial Lives' or 'Life in a Country Town'), affiliates it with the provincial settings of Flaubert's famous predecessor Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), Flaubert none the less saw his new novel as experimental because it set up a completely new relation between high literary style and low provincial subject: in March 1853 he was writing:

It is perhaps absurd to want to give prose the rhythm of verse (keeping it distinctly prose, however), and to write of ordinary life as one writes history or epic (but without falsifying the subject) ... But on the other hand it is perhaps a great experiment, and very original.

(Flaubert, 1980, p.182)

He was striving for a prose that would combine the rhythm of poetry with the dispassionate clarity of science, believing that this combination would precipitate within the reader an intense amalgam of emotional, mental and sensual reverberations. This prose was intended to transform the novel as a

genre from being simply a vehicle suitable for conveying flatly moral notions into a vibrant and challenging self-referential aesthetic object that would have a far more profound moral effect. In writing *Madame Bovary*, he presented a narrative of tantalizing insolubility that was to install doubt and dissatisfaction within the bourgeois reader.

But if this new style was to transform the easy didacticism familiar to the novel, it was also meant to transform its status as a pulp consumable. As Geoffrey Wall has so perceptively remarked:

In the new age of mass-production, in a world of cheap crude fiction manufactured in quantity, every sentence of this novel was to declare the enormity of the labour that had gone into its making. It was to be a luxury item, gratuitously crafted and minutely detailed.

(1992, p.ix)

To appreciate the force of this comment, you only have to compare the styles of Flaubert and Wilkie Collins, who was writing within the constraints of serial publication targeted at a popular readership. To put it another way, Flaubert viewed himself as engaged in writing a novel that wasn't a novel, or at any rate, not the sort of novel that Emma Bovary or any of her acquaintance would be likely to read, let alone understand.

Equally, the novel struck contemporaries as experimental. By the 1850s, Flaubert's fierce, transfiguring concentration on the details of everyday life had marked him for his contemporaries as the High Priest of a new realism, heir to Balzac. Flaubert's friend the critic and poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) held that the new realism was a combination of imaginative penetration and realistic precision. What the artist was aiming for was the aesthetic transfiguration of banal realities (see Cave, 1994, p.ix).

One of the ways in which Flaubert turned the ordinary into the aesthetic was a characteristic passionate attentiveness to material reality, a reality composed of a delicate insistence upon, say, the time of year, or on precise geographical detail, and most especially, on the multifariousness of things. His sometimes voluptuously documentary eye is much in evidence, for example, in this still life of the wedding banquet served at the Bovary marriage:

It was in the wagon-shed that the table had been laid. There were four sirloins, six dishes of chicken fricassee, a veal stew, three legs of mutton, and, in the middle, a nice roast suckling pig, flanked by four chitterlings with sorrel. At each corner, stood jugs of brandy. Bottles of sweet cider had creamy froth oozing out past their corks, and every glass had already been filled to the brim with wine. Big dishes of yellow custard, shuddering whenever the table was jogged, displayed, on their smooth surface, the initials of the newly-weds in arabesques of sugared almonds. They had brought in a pastry-cook from Yvetot for the tarts and the cakes. Because he was new to the district, he had taken great pains; and at dessert he appeared in person, carrying an elaborate confection that drew loud cries. At the base, to begin with, there was a square of blue cardboard representing a temple with porticoes, colonnades and stucco statuettes all around, in little niches decorated with gold paper stars; then on the second layer there was a castle made of Savoy cake, encircled by tiny fortifications of angelica, almonds, raisins and segments of orange; and finally,

on the upper platform, a green field with rocks and pools of jam and boats made out of nutshells, there was arrayed a little Cupid, perched on a chocolate swing, its two poles finished off with two real rose-buds, just like knobs, on the top.

(Flaubert, [1856–7] 1992, 1.4; p.22; all subsequent page references are to this edition)

The pastry-cook with his innocently snobbish and clichéd sugary wedding cake is just one of the many alter egos for Flaubert as artist of and for the provincial bourgeoisie who make their appearance within this novel. The difference is that Flaubert will – in spite of that gossamer momentary pleasure of the illusion registered in the ‘two real rose-buds, just like knobs’ he allows us to share with the wedding guests – meticulously dismantle this ideological confection of the delights and safeties of marriage to show it all to be pasteboard and perishable.

Another technique recognized as experimental was the way in which Flaubert teased a narrative out of nothing very much happening, making an elaborate drama of slow and tiny changes in consciousness, represented through minute description of things, people or the commonplaces of conversation. He himself was nervous about this experiment because of the very real risk of boring the reader; in January 1853 he wrote:

What worries me in my book is the element of *entertainment*. That side is weak; there is not enough action. I maintain, however, that *ideas* are action. It is more difficult to hold the reader's interest with them, I know, but if the style is right it can be done. I now have fifty pages in a row without a single event.

(Flaubert, 1980, p.179)

In the passage below, for example, nothing ‘happens’, yet through an intensity of slow-motion description (produced in part by a succession of small clauses piled one on top of another), punctuated by the erotic shorthand of the stocking, we are made aware of a crisis of intense, dazing desire in Charles Bovary, perhaps also in Emma Roualt:

According to the country custom, she offered him something to drink. He refused, she insisted, and in the end asked him, laughingly, to have a glass of liqueur with her. So she went to the cupboard for a bottle of curaçao, reached down two little glasses, filled one right to the brim, poured only a drop into the other, and after clinking glasses, raised it to her lips. As it was almost empty, she had to drink it from below; and, with her head right back, her lips pushed out, her neck stretching, she laughed at getting nothing, while the tip of her tongue, from between perfect teeth, licked delicately over the bottom of the glass.

She sat down again and she picked up her sewing, a white cotton stocking she was darning; she worked with her head bent; she said not a word, nor did Charles. The wind, coming under the door, rolled a bit of dust across the flagstones; he watched it drifting, and he heard only the pulse beating inside his head, and the cluck of a hen, far off, laying an egg in the farmyard. Emma, now and again, cooled her cheeks on the palms of her hands, chilling them again by touching the iron knob on the big fire-dogs. (1.3; p.17)

This attempt to transmute the mundane into pure aesthetic object, pure style, together with Flaubert's belief that the author should show rather than tell, leaving readers to arbitrate for themselves between moral possibilities,

mandated a novel of unusually elusive narratorial presence. Flaubert insisted that art should transcend personal convictions. He told George Sand that ‘one must not write with one’s heart’, explaining, ‘What I meant was: don’t put your own personality on stage. I believe that great art is scientific and impersonal. What is necessary is, by an intellectual effort, to transport yourself into your Characters – not attract them to yourself’ (Flaubert, 1982, p.95). The contemporary critic and novelist Guy de Maupassant commented:

M. Flaubert is, then, first and foremost an artist; that is, an objective writer. I defy anyone, after having read all his works, to make out what he is in private life, what he thinks or what he says in his everyday conversation. One knows what Dickens must have thought, what Balzac must have thought. They appear all the time in their books; but what do you imagine La Bruyère to have been, or the great Cervantes to have said? Flaubert never wrote the words *I, me*. He never talks to the audience in the middle of a book, or greets it at the end, like an actor on the stage, and he never writes prefaces. He is the showman of human puppets who must speak through his mouth while he refrains from the right to think through theirs: and there is to be no detecting the strings or recognizing the voice.

(quoted in Flaubert, [1856–7] 1965, p.272)

This is in sharp contrast to novelists who construct an authorial presence through moral commentary. Possibly one of the most persistent criticisms of the English realist writer George Eliot is of her frequent authorial intrusions, her guidance as to how the reader is expected, if not required, to respond, and her assumption of a shared moral consciousness between herself and each individual reader. Flaubert avoids doing this. Instead of framing his depiction of the world within such a voice, Flaubert chooses to frame it within a style. As the critic Saint-Beuve pointed out, Flaubert’s distinctive contribution to the development of the novel was this pervasive ‘styling’ of reality: ‘One precious quality distinguishes M. Gustave Flaubert from the other more or less exact observers who in our time pride themselves on conscientiously reproducing reality, and nothing but reality, and who occasionally succeed: he has *style*’ (quoted in Cave, 1994, p.ix). Here style approximates to Flaubert’s own definition – ‘an absolute manner of seeing things’ (quoted in *ibid.*, p.x). ‘I do not want my book to contain a *single* subjective reaction, nor a *single* reflection by the author’ – ‘an author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere’ (quoted in *ibid.*).

**Reread part 1, chapter 1, from the opening to ‘... kept completely still, without looking up’ (p.2). Try to make a preliminary analysis of Flaubert’s style.**

One of the first things to notice is that the novel opens with the presence of an implied author, signalled in the first word, ‘we’. This is an instance of the exception proving the rule. Author, and perhaps also reader, are implicated in that word ‘we’ as provincial audience, audience in this instance to a fifteen-year-old boy’s humiliating attempt to name himself successfully in public, and so to claim his place. That startling ‘we’ disappears after the first page, and yet it must surely condition the novel’s peculiar fascinated revulsion against the provincial. That ‘we’ of the schoolboy goes on marking the whole of the rest of the novel

with its peculiar pitiless detachment. The rest of the passage displays strongly the quality of intense transfiguring attention to material detail. This attention, in the case of Charles's preposterous hat, manages to convey its painfully embarrassing and conspicuous difference.

One of the other things you may have noticed is the way in which the text intermittently breaks into italics. Flaubert italicizes cliché (a practice known as double citation) so as to highlight the constitutive operation of unthinking consensus in this social world. Hence the new boy is wrong-footed by not knowing that '*the thing to do*' was to throw his cap against the wall. The fabric of *Madame Bovary* is shot through with such cliché, the phrases and pronunciations of the petite bourgeoisie which Flaubert had spent years collecting up in a sort of rage into a scrapbook which he called his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* ('Dictionary of Received Ideas').

## Cliché

Flaubert's command of cliché is staggering, and it is worth pausing on this facet of *Madame Bovary* a little longer. It has been argued that, if you look carefully, 'there is hardly a single oral utterance in the whole book which is not banal or inauthentic' (Cave, 1994, p.xviii). This insight can be extended also, for example, to many written utterances – Homais's journalism or Rodolphe's love-letters. Indeed, the novel can be seen as in part an exercise in stitching together the discourses of the bourgeoisie, from the farmer to the gentry. Emma's father's letter (2.10; p.138) mimics the writing of someone of his class: it is colloquial, slangy, full of spelling mistakes and blotted with the ash from the fireplace. It temporarily acts as a corrective to Emma's very different correspondence with Rodolphe, faked up from shreds of romantic novels, exchanged in accordance with the tradition of the novel of adultery stretching back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's classic epistolary novel about forbidden love, *Julie; ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), accompanied by equally banal love-tokens ('great handfuls of hair', miniatures, a ring), and, in the case of Rodolphe's last farewell letter, blotted with fake tears, and sealed up with a lying motto, *Amor nel cor* ('with love in the heart').

Other discourses that Flaubert employs include the political speechifying at the agricultural show by the visiting dignitaries, the threadbare religious dogma of the priest, and the provincial journalism, quasi-scientific and freethinking claptrap and libertine city slang that Homais employs in turn – you'll be able to think of plenty of other examples. Cliché is not restricted to printed or oral discourse – it appears, too, in the many pictures that are mentioned in the text, such as the illustrations pinned up in the love-nest in Rouen that mutely comment on what takes place below.

What exactly was the importance of cliché to Flaubert? Two passages in which, very unusually, the implied author makes an intervention, might be useful to us here. **Reread part 2, chapter 12, from 'As well as the riding-whip ...' (p.153) to '... when we wish to conjure pity from the stars' (p.154), and compare it with the passage in part 3, chapter 1, beginning**



*Figure 1.1 This picture exemplifies the way that nineteenth-century culture was fascinated by the figure of the woman engaged in sentimental correspondence. From The Quiver (1889). Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library*

**‘But men had their troubles ...’ (p.188) and ending ‘... she was in great perplexity’ (p.193). What does Flaubert have to say about the discourse of adulterous seduction? How does Emma’s relation to that discourse change?**

I expect you noticed that in the first passage Emma is represented as inhabiting cliché naively, to the secret contempt and astonishment of her lover Rodolphe. She is naive because although she draws her protocols from her romantic reading, she has never rehearsed them in her own life before. Unlike the immeasurably more experienced Rodolphe, she does not know that these protocols have a long-standing conventional status in real-life adultery. Importing these clichés fresh, she embarrasses Rodolphe with her ignorance of the decorums of adultery (his dismay at her gifts is an example of where she breaches the rules of mistresshood as understood in ‘the world’). Where he cannot hear, let alone speak, the language of love except ironically (that’s the point of his ‘embellishing his vows with many a *double entendre*’), she speaks it all too innocently:

Because he had heard such-like phrases murmured to him from the lips of the licentious or the venal, he hardly believed in hers; you must, he thought, beware of turgid speeches masking commonplace passions; as though the soul’s abundance does not sometimes spill over in the most decrepit metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of their needs, their ideas, their afflictions, and since human speech is like a cracked cauldron on which we knock out tunes for dancing-bears, when we wish to conjure pity from the stars. (2.12; p.154)

In the second passage, however, Emma no longer inhabits cliché but uses it in a thoroughly Flaubertian way to seduce the also corrupted Léon. Out of a well-rehearsed lexicon of platitudes they reconstruct a narrative of the past that is usefully at once economical with the truth and suitable as a foundation for their future relations – ‘each of them now devising for the other an ideal arrangement of their past’ (3.1; p.190). Flaubert comments: ‘Language is indeed a machine that continually amplifies the emotions’ (ibid.). The difference between this scene and the first one is that while Emma is reduced to a mass-produced automaton in Rodolphe’s eyes because she speaks in the same old linguistic cliché which devalues emotion, she now operates language like a machine to produce and then to ‘amplify’ emotion.

Perhaps the most important thing about cliché is that it is always second-hand, it has always been circulated before. In this, it is characteristic of bourgeois commodity culture. We’ll be coming back to the ways in which Emma’s world is a commodity culture in the next chapter, but for now I’d like to take a quick look at cliché as it operates in another scene. **Reread part 3, chapter 3, from ‘Three whole days of exquisite splendour ...’ (p.208) to ‘... her amatory ingenuity’ (p.209), trying to identify cliché. What is the effect of the sudden discovery of the scarlet ribbon?**

In this passage, it is clear that the lovers are engaged in an act of willed cliché. The strain is registered in that word ‘veritable’, which in context actually turns out to mean ‘pretend’. Emma and Léon’s adulterous ‘honeymoon’ buttresses the conventions of a magazine romance with an evocation of a crude magazine



Figure 1.2 This sugary scene of idyllic courtship suggests something of the style of magazine romance that Emma is endeavouring to live out. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library

illustration, and generalized allusion to Scott, Lamartine, Goethe, Berlioz and Chateaubriand.

Everything is 'as though'. Everything is shot through with 'decrepit metaphors'. This is a corruptly Edenic island on which it is 'as though' 'nature had only just come into existence'. This nature comes complete with a boat, a moon 'melancholy and full of poetry', willows, a song drifting across the water, a sentimental posture adopted by Emma. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which is discussed later in this book, Edna Pontellier and Robert experience a similarly idyllic and unreal paradise when they cross to the *Chênrière Caminada* when Edna is similarly disenchanted with the business of marriage and domesticity. For Emma and Léon, the 'real' world of labour, of barking dogs and 'rumbling ... wagons', is 'fading away' and gives way to the world of 'Robinson Crusoe', which is, of course, not only a fictional world, but a second-hand one. Flaubert has skilfully created a delicate sense of balance between the sensual and romantic overtones and the reader's recognition that the couple's experience is a willed living of a romantic cliché. That recognition is underscored by the discovery of the ribbon, which proves that the whole experience has already been had before, by Rodolphe – like Emma herself.

One of the problems the novel as a whole both struggles with and dramatizes is the discrepancy between lived, passionate subjectivity and the second-hand, already read, already written, already spoken forms in which it is obliged to express itself. With a characteristic perversity, the novel tries to make language new by attending scrupulously to the very threadbareness of its resources.

## Irony

Let's pause to consider how a style can achieve moral force without an overtly moralizing narrator. In *Madame Bovary*, this sort of moral styling can be located most pervasively in Flaubert's extensive use of irony. Flaubert's irony is not like Jane Austen's, which is located principally within the authorial voice; rather, it works (by and large) by juxtaposition and repetition.

One strategy Flaubert uses is to move, using the technique of free indirect discourse, in and out of a person's consciousness, or from one person's consciousness to another's. At one moment the text will offer a detailed description of a character's state of mind in terms that they would themselves recognize, the next we will be treated to deadpan documentary description, or we will be switchbacked between mutually ironizing perspectives.

**Take a few moments to try to identify some places in the text where Flaubert deploys this technique.**

A simple example might be the little scene near the end of the novel when the apprentice Justin kneels weeping on Emma's grave (3.10; p.279). Here Flaubert achieves his characteristic jolt courtesy of a variation of viewpoint between the narrative voice and Lestiboudois's agenda:

On the grave, among the pine-trees, a boy knelt weeping, and his poor heart, cracked with sorrow, was shaking in the darkness, under the burden of an immense regret, softer than the moon and fathomless as night. The gate suddenly gave a squeak. It was Lestiboudois: he'd come to fetch the spade he'd left behind. He recognized Justin scaling the wall, and now he knew the name of the malefactor who had been stealing his potatoes. (3.10; p.279)

Another example would be the scene depicting the Bovarys in bed, in which Charles indulges a waking dream of the future that includes a happy marriage for his daughter, while Emma envisages escape into a heavily exoticized and romanticized land with her lover Rodolphe: the language of domestic idyll is undone by that of romantic idyll (2.12; pp.157–8). You should be able to identify many more such examples; the painfulness of the novel is in very large measure owing to these dislocations.

More elaborate is the way one episode may be followed by another that implicitly ironizes the first. We have already picked up a miniature example of this in the 'honeymoon' sequence. Altogether more baroque is the way the ball at La Vaubeyessard is replayed in little by the organ-grinder's automata which Emma watches out of the window, and is finally repeated, in its most degraded form, in the masked ball to which Emma goes cross-dressed as some sort of *declassée* libertine.

Finally, two situations or discourses may be interlocked so that they mutually ironize and destabilize each other, as in the tour de force of Rodolphe's flirtation with Emma at the agricultural show. **Reread part 2, chapter 8, from 'Monsieur Lieuvain now sat down ...' (p.119) to '... soothingly, easily, their fingers entwined' (p.120). What is the effect of the alternation between the lovers' conversation and the amplified speech-making?**

One of the effects of interlocking Rodolphe's conversation with Monsieur Lieuvain's speech and the subsequent prize-giving is to underscore the nature of seduction as rhetoric. The two men make parallel arguments, albeit drawn from different scientific discourses: Lieuvain argues using a language borrowed from the social anthropology of the day, while Rodolphe borrows the quasi-scientific language of magnetism and affinities. As he reaches nearer his 'prize', the show's prize-giving ceremonies begin and set up a robust commentary upon Rodolphe's self-serving command of the language of romance. 'A hundred times I wanted to leave, and I followed you, I stayed', says Rodolphe, and 'Manures' shouts the megaphone. 'I shall carry with me the memory of you', says Rodolphe, and the loudspeaker gives the subtext to this tosh – awarding a prize 'for a merino ram'. 'Surely, I will be somewhere in your thoughts, in your life?' pleads Rodolphe, and the sound system growls 'Swine'. But if the text seems to point up Emma's hopeless folly and Rodolphe's habits of predation, it also underlines all the time the intractably earthy and sheerly animal quality of local life, the existence she is trying to escape, 'domestic service'.

**Let's take a look at one more example. Read the conversation between Charles and Emma in part 2, chapter 11, from 'Across the silence that filled the village ...' (p.149) until the end of the chapter (p.150). How are the ironies functioning here?**

Charles is frantic with anxiety about the operation on Hippolyte, an amputation for which his medical mistake is responsible. Emma is frantic with sexual repulsion, redoubled by the disappointment of her ambitious hopes that Charles's cure of Hippolyte's club-foot would make both their fortunes. The passage anatomizes the couple's misapprehensions of one another, their failure to synchronize, and offers a string of metaphors that point to the death of the marriage: Charles's observation drops into Emma's mind 'like a lead bullet on a silver dish'; their exchange of glances is punctuated by the cries of the patient 'like the far-off bellow of some creature being slaughtered'; Emma imagines her husband as dead – 'Charles seemed as remote from her life, as eternally absent, as impossible and annihilated, as if he were near death, and in his last agony before her eyes.' If the success of the operation returns a relieved if humiliated Charles to his wife, it also seems to amputate what is left of Emma's virtue and hurls her into 'the malignant ironies of adultery triumphant'. As Flaubert wrote of this scene on 9 October 1852:

It is something that could be taken seriously, and yet I fully intend it to be grotesque. This will be the first time, I think, that a book makes fun of its leading lady and its leading man. The irony does not detract from the pathetic aspect, but rather intensifies it. In my third part, which will be full of farcical things, I want my readers to weep.

(Flaubert, 1980, pp.171–2)

One last ironic technique merits a mention here, and that is the irony committed by things. As has already been remarked, things comment silently upon the action – the pictures and the symbolic pink sea-shells in the Rouen love-nest or the statue of Salomé ('the Dancing Marianne') and the painting of the Damnation in the cathedral are drawn from a nineteenth-century pictorial tradition in which such details have moral and erotic force. Things also have a disconcerting habit

of multiplying – there are no fewer than three riding-whips in this novel, all of them connected with seductions. Above all, ironies breed out of the circulation of things. You may perhaps have noticed how often something intended for one person finds its way into the hand of another. **Pause and try to think of some examples.**

Clearly, the ‘scarlet ribbon’ is one such thing that has got loose from its original transaction and turns up to haunt and to comment upon a new situation. Further examples of this would include Léon’s violets, which Charles takes up to cool his eyes swollen from weeping for his father, or Rodolphe’s farewell letter, which Charles comes across after Emma’s death. The ironies are none the less painful for going unnoticed by their victims – almost without exception. The exception is, increasingly, Emma, and that begins to mark her out as Flaubert’s double.

## **A novel about nothing; or, ennui**

Let us turn from Flaubert’s style to his subject – Madame Bovary, a young married woman in a provincial town. One way of describing her predicament after her marriage to Charles Bovary in part 1 is to say that she is suffering from a complex and intractable boredom – in French, ‘ennui’. During the 1850s in France a culturally specific concept of ‘ennui’ had emerged, and this provides us with one useful frame within which to bring into focus what *Madame Bovary* is ‘about’.

Throughout his life, Flaubert acknowledged that he, like many French artists at the time, was suffering from what was called ‘ennui’. There is no simple one-word translation of the term; ‘boredom’, ‘frustration’ and ‘depression’ are inadequate, although all form part of the concept. Perhaps ‘world-weariness’ might serve as a fair approximation, especially when reinforced with a consciousness of something missing and a debilitating sense of the gap between potential and achievement. Above all, to suffer from ennui you first of all had to be conscious of your suffering, a finer spirit superior to those ordinary people who were too ‘stupid’ to perceive the real and inevitable misery of life and were, moreover, capable of being fooled into thinking they actually enjoyed it. Even as a young man, Flaubert called life ‘hideous’, flat, boring, telling his mistress Louise Colet, ‘I detest life’, and began to express his sense of life as a series of incongruities distinguished by ‘le grotesque triste’ (‘ludicrous sadness’). His friend Charles Baudelaire also specialized in ennui, evoking in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) the pain of unattainable aspirations, the fruitless quest for material comfort and spiritual happiness, the frustrated desire for a state in which man would be released from the burden of consciousness. The failure of such quests, embodied within a narrative of the search for love and its failure or disappointment, only serves to make the desire more thrillingly acute. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert also explores ennui, but within a rather less exquisite modality. His heroine is strung between an ordinariness raised to grotesquerie and the sad desperation of unfulfilled aspirations; ‘the whole value of my book, if it has a value, will be that it has managed to walk straight on a hairsbreadth tightrope over the double abyss of lyricism and vulgarity’ (quoted in Roe, 1989, p.25).

Emma feels her ennui as an elusive malaise. It seems to derive from her radical dissatisfaction with her provincial life, expressed in part as a fantasy about metropolitan Paris (which Emma never sees but assesses as being the centre of French sophistication and of non-provincial life): 'Everything in her immediate surroundings, the boring countryside, the imbecile petits bourgeois, the general mediocrity of life, seemed to be a kind of anomaly, a unique accident that had befallen her alone, while beyond, as far as the eye could see, there unfurled the immense kingdom of pleasure and passion' (2.9; p.46). In tandem with these fantasies of escape, her ennui realizes itself as sexual revulsion: 'And so she directed solely at [her husband] all the manifold hatred that sprang from her ennui, and every effort to curtail it served but to augment it; for those vain efforts only added to the other reasons for despair and contributed even further to their estrangement ... Domestic mediocrity drove her to sumptuous fantasies, marital caresses to adulterous desires' (2.5; p.86). Like George Eliot's heroine Dorothea Brooke, she is enmeshed in provincial intrigue and boredom; like both Dorothea and Isabel Archer, heroine of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, her unformulated but intensely felt aspirations are not met by marriage, indeed, they are to some extent created and augmented by her experience of marriage. Unlike these other heroines, however, Emma is not successfully prescribed the sedative of high moral ideals; although she always retains a longing memory of a sense of devotional, orgasmic wholeness that (she feels) pervaded her convent girlhood, she chooses instead, as we shall see, the analgesics of sex, shopping and, eventually, suicide.

As you will have noticed, the novel is laid out in three parts. Each of those parts corresponds to another 'stage' in Emma's malaise, corruption or education, depending on how you interpret it. The whole amounts to a case-study; as Tony Tanner puts it, 'what would or could or might genuinely cure what Emma suffers from is the real problem posed by the book, which is itself a long effort of true diagnosis' (1979, p.284). In fact, marriage was conventionally prescribed for ennui and other psychological complaints in young women, as this passage suggests:

– Oh, yes, Félicité went on, you're just like la Guérine, Père Guérin's daughter, the fisherman at Pollet, the one I knew in Dieppe, before I came here. She was so sad, so sad, just to see her standing on her front-step, she looked for all the world like a white shroud spread out by the door. Her trouble, from what they say, was a kind of fog she had in her head, and the doctors couldn't do a thing, nor the *curé*. Whenever it took her really bad, she'd go off on her own along the beach, and the customs officer, on his rounds, often found her lying there flat on her face and crying into the pebbles. And after she was married, it went off, so they say.

– But with me, said Emma, it was after I married that it came on. (2.5; p.87)

La Guérine's deathly 'fog' withdraws her completely from society; 'lying there flat on her face and crying into the pebbles', she is regularly saved by the intervention of the customs officer who could be said to reassimilate her into 'the customs' so that she can eventually marry. The result is that the fog 'went off'. In this little scenario, La Guérine's life has been determined and defined by three men – her father, the customs officer and the husband. Tanner concludes that

her sickness is connected to the vagueness of her position in society; after being a daughter (La Guérine), she is on the threshold of a new role when she can no longer identify herself with her father but has not yet been initiated into a new identity as a wife. But as part 1 is at pains to demonstrate, marriage, the mainspring of the plot of women's lives, the moment when a woman's identity is successfully transferred from being determined by her father to being determined by her husband, is shown to be from Emma's point of view disappointing sexually, and constricting socially. It fails to cure a boredom that she is already experiencing well before she marries: 'her eyes clouding with boredom, her thoughts drifting' (1.3; p.17). Contrasting her own reality with the imaginative one she grants to others, she concludes that 'theirs was the kind of life that opens up the heart, that brings the senses into bloom. But this, this life of hers was as cold as an attic that looks north: and boredom, quiet as the spider, was spinning its web in the shadowy places of her heart' (1.7; p.34).

Marriage as a solution goes up in flames with her wedding bouquet. However, unlike her unhappy predecessor as Charles Bovary's wife, Emma is not dead when her wedding bouquet is reduced to 'black butterflies' (1.9; p.53); instead she lives to try out another conventional cure – motherhood. Part 2 makes it clear that neither a change of place, nor a child (because it is a daughter, and thus condemned to a similar fate), nor romantic friendship with Léon, nor even full-blown adultery with Rodolphe provides the longed-for escape that she plans so carefully at the end of the section. Part 3 postulates the possibility that a different lover, Léon, might provide a more manageable, perhaps even a more 'artistic', experience, discards this possibility, gives Emma up to the debts resulting from her mad voracity for material things to assuage the void, conducts her through to an agonizing suicide and finally performs a series of post-mortems upon her body and belongings. We return finally to Charles Bovary's tragedy, the tragedy of unreturned, unrecognized and betrayed romantic love that perhaps we should, as the good bourgeoisie, have been interested in, had we not been so seduced by the aspirational, glamorous Emma. Charles Bovary, the true romantic lover, dies unrecognized, undone, 'unnamed' in the terms of the opening sequence, by Emma's secret adulteries, 'corrupted' by her, even half-metamorphosed into her as he clutches her black tress in his dying hand. '*Charbovari*' has fully disintegrated into the half pun '*charivari*' by the end of the novel. (A charivari was a mocking ceremony which derided an incongruous marriage.) The whole is a study of bourgeois desire, its modes, mechanisms, excitements and disappointments. But above all, of course, it is a study of adultery.

In *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, Tony Tanner (1979) discusses the role played by adultery in fiction. The major nineteenth-century novels are concerned with the centrality of marriage and with establishing property rights. If you think about the novels of, say, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, their impetus seems to be inclined towards marriage and appropriate resolutions that promote the idea of the family, settlement, social cohesion, and so on. They represent that which threatens these formations as errant female desire. Consequently, the plot of adultery becomes the basis for some of the most influential novels of the nineteenth century. According to Tanner, 'the

unfaithful wife is, in social terms, a self-cancelling figure, one from whom society would prefer to withhold recognition so that it would be possible to say that socially and categorically the adulterous woman does not exist' (1979, p.13). It is this trajectory towards 'non-existence' that Emma will describe over the course of the novel.

Emma's ennui is initially formulated by romance expectations and begins by taking the form of quintessentially bourgeois class aspirations. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, she allows her debased reading to construct her view of the real. She draws her notions of '*felicity, passion and rapture*' (1.5; p.27) from a range of literary and sub-literary 'texts': romantic literature such as Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, Chateaubriand's *Athalie*, Lamartine's poetry; china plates depicting the career of the penitent mistress of Louis XIV; devotional manuals; old love-songs and ballads; romantic trash fiction; Walter Scott. From all of these she hopes 'to extract some kind of personal profit; and she discarded as useless anything that did not lend itself to her heart's immediate satisfaction' (1.6; p.28). Equally noticeable is her addiction to the snob-element in all this literature, most strikingly adumbrated in the description of the keepsake books (1.6; p.29). Her fantasies are realized in the ball at Vaubeyessard, which oozes the erotics of snobbery cross-bred with romantic tosh. The descriptions breathe Emma's impassioned, anxious attention to the details of class-distinction, which strings the pleasures of unaccustomed luxury onto the feverish language of aspirational journalism:

Purple-red lobster-claws straddled the plates; fresh fruit was piled in shallow baskets lined with moss; the quails were unplucked, the steam was rising; and, in silk stockings, knee-breaches, white cravat and frilled shirt, solemn as a judge, the butler, handing the dishes, each already carved, between the shoulders of the guests, would drop on to your plate with a sweep of his spoon the very morsel of your choice. (1.8; p.37)

While Emma is breathlessly seduced by the transforming erotics of moneyed novelty – novelty of food, manners, language, modes of sexual transgression, dances – Flaubert's own voice drops a cold satiric note in just occasionally. Notice here, for example, the effect of the choice of the word 'moderate': the men at the ball 'had the complexion that comes with money, the clear complexion that looks well against the whiteness of porcelain, the lustre of satin, the bloom on expensive furniture, and is best preserved by a moderate diet of exquisite foodstuffs' (1.8; pp.39–40). They embody Emma's fantasy of desire fulfilled: 'In their coolly glancing eyes lingered the calm of passions habitually appeased' (1.8; p.40). The longing that the ball arouses in Emma is so intense that it starts to erase her past class identity, overwriting it with a new vision of herself in the act of fulfilling social and sexual aspiration with one exquisitely erotic and luxuriously leisured mouthful of ice-cream:

She saw the farmhouse, the muddy pond, her father in his smock under the apple-trees, and an image of herself, in the old days, skimming her finger over the cream on the milk-churns in the dairy. But, in the great dazzlement of this hour, her past life, always so vivid, was vanishing without trace, and she almost doubted that it had been hers. There she was at the ball; beyond it, only a great blur of shadows. Here she was eating a maraschino ice, holding the silver

cockle-shell in her left hand, her eyes half closing, the spoon between her lips.  
(1.8; p.40)

This vision of herself in the very act of appeasing appetite is perhaps the closest Emma comes to fulfilment in the novel. The nature of ennui consists in the nausea of repetition, and *Madame Bovary* is built upon repetition. Each experience is repeated, sometimes more than once, in a progressively degenerate and ironized form, until finally it can no longer sustain, even in the most vestigial way, Emma's desires. Even that maraschino ice-cream perhaps finds its final repetition as the greedily crammed mouthful of arsenic.

**Reread the passage in part 1, chapter 8, beginning 'At three in the morning ...' (p.41) and ending '... the guests retired to bed' (p.41). Now compare it with the passage in part 1, chapter 9, that opens 'Sometimes, in the afternoon ...' (p.51) and runs to 'She used to watch him going' (p.51). How does the second passage modify and comment upon the first?**

Emma's entry into a dream-world via her waltz with the attractive and anonymous Viscount is doubled and parodically miniaturized in the cheap pleasures peddled by the itinerant organ-grinder. Her dreams are embodied by mechanized dancers 'the size of your finger, women in pink turbans, Tyrolean peasants in their jackets, monkeys in frock-coats', and so on, who 'went round and round, in among the armchairs, the sofas, the console tables, mirrored in bits of glass held together at their edges by a strip of gold paper' (1.9; p.51). The organ-grinder 'turned the handle' (just like Flaubert, for whom this figure, amongst others, is a surrogate), playing 'tunes being played far away in the theatres ... echoes from another world that carried as far as Emma'. Immediately her thoughts catch fire and 'a never-ending saraband was unwinding in her head' which was leaping 'from sorrow to sorrow'. The effect is to underline the disparity between what is available to Emma and her straining after the mere 'echoes of another world'.

The nausea of repetition poisons all bourgeois experience. If marriage downgrades love into habit – Charles's sexual eagerness had turned into a 'habit like any other, a favourite pudding after the monotony of dinner' (1.7; p.34) – the luscious transgressions of adultery eventually become just as monotonous. From the very beginning of the *affaire*, the worldly-wise Rodolphe undervalues Emma's passion for him, because as far as he is concerned he is simply repeating previous experiences:

He had heard such stuff so many times that her words meant very little to him. Emma was just like any other mistress; and the charm of novelty, falling down slowly like a dress, exposed only the eternal monotony of passion, always the same forms and the same language. (2.12; p.154)

Adultery, under Rodolphe's management, ceases to be Emma's wild escape and is tamed into convenience: Rodolphe is said to 'organize her adultery according to his whim' and as a result 'they were, with each other, like a married couple tranquilly nourishing a domestic flame' (2.10; p.138). Adultery gives up its ability to ironize marriage; it becomes just the same. The despair Emma eventually suffers from stems not from remorse (as would have been conventional in the

novel of the day) but, as Tanner remarks, from the discovery 'that there is finally no difference in these two regions of experience' (1979, p.310). It is a state which is best summed up by Emma's crushing realization that she 'was rediscovering in adultery the platitudes of marriage' (3.6; p.236).

Eventually, Emma will herself be so corrupted or 'experienced' that she is on the very edge of being able to indulge her lovers in a degraded, consciously inauthentic pastiche of her earlier love:

She burst into tears. Rodolphe believed it was the overflowing of her love ... he exclaimed:

– Ah, forgive me! You're the only woman I want. I've been an imbecile and a scoundrel! I love you, I shall always love you! ... What's the matter? Tell me.

– He went down on his knees.

– Well ... I'm ruined, Rodolphe. And you're going to lend me three thousand francs!' (3.8; pp.253–4)

The moral bankruptcy of such adulterous speculation in sentiment is neatly exemplified by Rodolphe's inability, not to say unwillingness, to provide real cash.

Deepening this sense of repetition and sameness, Flaubert introduces metaphors of 'circling' and 'turning' to emphasize Emma's entrapment within the daily round. Binet's happy (perhaps even wise) obsession with turning his useless wooden napkin rings, and especially his touchingly obtuse and absurd advice to the bored Léon, 'If I were you, I'd have a lathe!' (2.6; p.94), contrasts sharply with her frustrations. **Can you identify any scenes in which Emma is associated with turning or circling?**

There are several possible examples. One, which literally provides a turning point for Emma, we have already dealt with – the waltz at the ball at La Vaubeyssard. Most famously, Emma's adulterous cab ride with Léon goes round and round as it circles Rouen, continually passing the same scenes, mimicking the repetition of the sexual act, predicting satiation. The specialness, the urgency, that the lovers presumably feel, is wiped out by Flaubert's choice instead to describe the reactions of the mildly bemused populace who note that the cab comes 'into view like this over and over again' (3.1; p.199). Even these adulterous and adventurous turnings, repeated, sooner or later give up their exciting novelty and subside again under the tide of Emma's ennui.

## The heroine as novelist

As we've already suggested, Emma eventually begins to fill the place of real 'authentic' experience with aesthetics, with 'art'. She becomes in the process the most important and troubling surrogate for Flaubert himself in the novel. Engaged, like him, in crafting a 'novel' centred upon a romantic subjectivity out of the unpromising materials she has to hand, she occasionally manages to overcome the perpetual inadequacy of the object of desire by an act of the imagination. If this heroine is another in the long erotic tradition of representing woman as a reader of letters, she also stages herself as a writer of letters. This begins very early in the novel:

Madame would be upstairs, in her room. She would be wearing her dressing-gown unbuttoned, revealing, between the copious folds of her corsage, a pleated chemisette with gold buttons. Round her waist she had a cord with big tassels, and her little wine-red slippers had large knots of ribbon, spreading down over the instep. She had bought herself a blotting-pad, a writing-case, a pen-holder and envelopes, though she had nobody to write to; she would dust her ornaments, look at herself in the mirror, pick up a book, then, dreaming between the lines, let it fall into her lap. (1.9; p.47)

She will, of course, find herself two lovers to write letters to in due course. But even these lovers will always be more satisfactory written to and dreamt about, rather than dealt with in the flesh. This strategy is first shadowed in the shape of Emma's imaginings about the 'Viscount', or rather, in his absence, about the 'green silk cigar-case' which may or may not have been his. From this object, together with a map of Paris, and literature about the capital, she breeds an imaginary narrative about the Viscount's mistress, about his social life in Paris, about the metropolis as site of pleasure. The case itself is of little value and less usefulness in a house where, significantly, cigars make Charles Bovary ill, but it enables Emma to support her imaginary existence on material evidence: 'She would look at it, open it, and then breathe the scent of its lining, a mixture of tobacco and verberna ... A sigh of love had passed into the fabric of the work; every touch of the needle had stitched fast a vision or a memory, and each one of those entwining threads of silk was the elaboration of the same speechless passion' (1.9; p.44). In the same way, her lovers are always more satisfactory, more desirable, in their absence, because their absence allows for the transforming operation of the imagination:

She was in love with Léon, and she sought solitude, the better to take her pleasure, undistracted, in images of him. The actual sight of him upset these voluptuous meditations. Emma trembled at the sound of his footsteps; and, in his presence, the emotion subsided, leaving her with only an immense astonishment that finished in sadness. (2.5: pp.85–6)

Here Emma reverses the real and the imaginary, finding reality to be inferior. Emma is able to keep control over 'her' reality in her imagination whereas Charles, Léon, Rodolphe, L'Heureux and others, consistently fail to play their parts in this virtual existence. As the novel proceeds, 'Emma enacts this predicament by attempting to apply to the real world an imaginative sensibility which can only be productive, according to Flaubert's logic, in the realm of art' (Cave, 1994, p.xvi). Hence Emma's second adventure in adultery, with Léon, also dwindles in actuality into all the 'platitudes of marriage', yet, by continuing to play by the rules of illicit love – 'a woman should always write to her lover' – she manages to maintain a state of pleasurable desire: 'as she was writing, she beheld a different man, a phantom put together from her most ardent memories, her favourite books, her most powerful longings; and by the end he became so real, so tangible, that her heart was racing with the wonder of it, though she was unable to imagine him distinctly, for he faded, like a god, into the abundance of his attributes' (3.6; pp.236–7).

In a sense, the bundles of letters she leaves behind for the unhappy Charles to find and read are her 'novel', that other novel in a debased novelistic language

that shadows Flaubert's own. Lest this should sound an overstrained claim, it is worth returning to Flaubert's letters, which suggest a very strong identification with his heroine. In a letter to Hippolyte Taine of 20 November 1866, he confessed that 'My imaginary characters overwhelm me, pursue me – or rather it is I who find myself under their skins. When I was writing *Madame Bovary*'s poisoning scene I had such a taste of arsenic in my mouth, I was so poisoned myself, that I had two bouts of indigestion one after the other, and they were quite real because I vomited up all of my dinner' (Flaubert, 1997, p.316). In the novel, the taste of arsenic is described as 'inky', suggesting that somehow Flaubert's writing and his heroine's arsenic-eating were similar enterprises.

But if Flaubert *is* Emma, he supplies himself also with other authorial surrogates, including, as we've already remarked, the organ-grinder showing his puppets. These surrogates are antithetical to the dream of romantic subjectivity, being associated predominantly with mechanism and medicine. There is, for instance, the pharmacist Homais, at one moment busy in his *Capharnaum* mixing poisons and cures indiscriminately and dreaming of fame, at another presiding over the preserving pans and jam-pots that will render the summer's crop imperishable. Most surprisingly of all, the laughable Binet, 'alone, up in his attic', calls up and comments upon the novelist's art. Binet's productions may be absurd in that they are utterly devoid of use-value and ostentatiously genteel – he never sells or uses any of his serviette-rings, candlesticks or banister-knobs – but that, surely, makes them true Flaubertian aesthetic objects fallen on hard times in a bourgeois household. Most interesting of all is the description of his making of a worthless 'replica' of something itself conspicuously useless. It serves as an ironic representation of the business of making a novel out of reality; the business of making it is described as a solitary orgasmic rush of desire fulfilled:

He was alone, up in his attic, busy making a wooden replica of one of those indescribable ivories, composed of crescents and spheres one inside the other, the whole thing erect like an obelisk and entirely useless; he was working on the very last piece, he was nearly there! In the chiaroscuro of the workshop, the golden dust was streaming off the lathe, like the plume of sparks at the hoof of a galloping horse; the two wheels were turning, buzzing; Binet was smiling, chin down, nostrils dilated, apparently lost in that state of complete happiness which belongs no doubt only to mediocre pursuits, those that amuse the intelligence with facile difficulties, and appease it with an achievement that quite dulls the imagination. (3.7; p.249)

If Flaubert is, in this sense, the organ-grinder, Homais and Binet rolled into one, this is the Flaubert who, as we'll see in the next chapter, mercilessly dissects his heroine's romantic aspirations, insisting on their nature as merely mechanical.

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Suggestions for further reading can be found at the end of chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 2

# *Madame Bovary*: becoming a heroine

*by Marilyn Brooks, with Nicola Watson*

In this chapter, we'll be exploring the ways in which Emma's identity is simultaneously constructed and undone within the novel. In the last chapter we explored the ways in which Emma's ennui expresses itself – but we have not as yet attempted to diagnose the source of that ennui. One way of thinking about ennui is to argue that Emma's problems are to do with her attempts to establish her identity to her own satisfaction within the social context that shapes and defines it for her and despite her.

## **Becoming Madame Bovary**

Who is Madame Bovary? The very title of the novel, *Madame Bovary*, puts into question names as indicators of identity – there are no fewer than three Madames Bovary in the story. In literal terms we have Charles's mother, his dead first wife and Emma herself who all share the name 'Madame Bovary', but this is not exactly the same as the three symbolic identities that are described next. As Rodolphe points out, that name is not rightfully Emma's at all, she gets it second-hand from her husband: 'It's not your name, anyway; you borrowed it!' (Flaubert, [1856–7] 1992, 2.9; p.125; all subsequent page references are to this edition). If we were to be more censorious, we might say that she had all but stolen it from H  lo  se Bovary. The third Madame Bovary was formerly Emma Rouault, consequently her marriage involves 'a double replacement' of title (such as our Miss to Mrs) and of name. But this first name is still only Emma's name courtesy of her father. And it is her father who instigates and authorizes the marriage that will change the family name: 'If he asks me for her ... he can have her' (1.3; p.18). Hence the name 'Emma Rouault' contains the heroine's 'own' identity (Emma) and something which, Tony Tanner suggests, 'is by definition not your own and designates the Other, the father'; it 'provides, as it were, the context that gives the first name meaning' (1979, p.306). Even this first name is surprisingly unstable: when Emma is first introduced to Charles and to the reader it is as Monsieur Rouault's 'young lady'. Almost immediately Charles meets 'a young woman, in a blue merino-wool dress with three flounces' (1.2; p.10). In neither case does she appear as 'Emma'; rather, she is named as 'Mademoiselle Emma' (1.2; p.11) and as 'Mademoiselle Rouault' (1.2; p.13). Throughout, she will be described by a kaleidoscopic mishmash of names and roles – 'my mother', 'a good person', 'little lady', 'my wife', 'my girl', 'my child', and so on – which compose the relational creature, Madame Bovary.

The category 'Madame Bovary', then, although it carries certain social expectations, waits to be filled out. If Emma starts her fictional life as a daughter, she moves through a bewildering variety of conventional incarnations after her marriage. For example, she consciously and conspicuously experiments with staging herself as the good wife and sentimental mother. **Reread part 2, chapter 6, from 'In through the window ...' (p.91) to '... Caribs or Botocudos' (p.93). How does Emma both undermine and inhabit the role of mother?**

Here Emma is shown struggling with the constrictions of motherhood, repudiating them in private, adopting them in public. The misfit between Emma and her role as the virtuous and caring wife and mother is signalled by a slippage in names from 'her mother' and 'the young woman' to 'Madame Bovary' to 'Emma'. The sentimental version of the role – 'rather silly and rather fine' – played over by Emma to herself is contrasted with Charles's action in producing the plaster and his genuine if undisplayed upset, and juxtaposed with the Homais's anxiously progressive parenting. (But whereas George Eliot might have allowed it all to rest there, the Homais household's conscientiousness is presented as undeniably absurd.) Again, Emma plays a very pretty wife, warming her husband's slippers, sewing buttons on his shirts, and so on, but only when she has the script of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* to play to, and a besotted Léon in addition to her husband as appreciative audience (2.5; pp.84–5). And she is also capable of acting the pious matron, dedicating herself to 'lavish works of charity' (2.14; p.174) and imagining herself something of a La Vallière – Louis XVI's ex-mistress, who famously repented and went into a convent – as she does so. These often heavily ironized self-dramatizations are, however much they are staged in public, essentially solitary gratifications, almost a form of masturbation. All these roles are modelled after Emma's reading; but her most persistent construction of herself in these early pages is as a heroine waiting for something to happen (see Figure 2.1)

If we return to the description of Emma in her room that we examined in the last chapter, we can see the way in which she stages herself as a heroine in need of a story:

She would be wearing her dressing-gown unbuttoned, revealing, between the folds of her corsage, a pleated chemisette with gold buttons. Round her waist she had a cord with big tassels, and her little wine-red slippers had large knots of ribbon, spreading down over the instep. She had bought herself a blotting-pad, a writing-case, a pen-holder and envelopes, though she had nobody to write to; she would dust her ornaments, look at herself in the mirror, pick up a book, then, dreaming between the lines, let it fall into her lap. She yearned to travel or to go back to living in the convent. She wanted equally to die and to live in Paris. (1.9; p.47)

In keeping with *Madame Bovary's* investment in detailing the material world, Emma is presented by way of meticulous descriptions of her clothing and her personal belongings. Her clothes and her knick-knacks mark her class, affluence and marital status, while simultaneously pointing to her romantic and class aspirations. Her dress exhibits unusual refinement and, indeed, inappropriate expense. It is devised to help her stage herself as 'heroine'. She has posed herself



*Figure 2.1 Lucy Ashton, the heroine of Sir Walter Scott's important novel The Bride of Lammermoor (1819), here pictured as the kind of refined and languishing heroine that Emma imagines herself to be. Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library*

as a romantic tableau, an illustration escaped from a trashy novel; costumed like an actress waiting for her cue, she muses on her reflection in the mirror, cons her fantasized script. She is imagining a life, and yet is more than indecisive about what she wants, only seeing different solutions – ‘to travel or to go back into the convent’; ‘to die or to live in Paris’ – as somehow the same, as forms of escape. Throughout the novel, her clothes will serve as a pointer to her ability to imagine herself into a romantic narrative. For example, she hoards the gown she wears to the ball at La Vaubeyessard. She all but vanishes into slatternly grey stockings during a period of depression. As she grows more abandoned, her clothes reflect this, becoming ever more experimental and exoticized: Algerian scarves, hair *à la Chinoise*, cross-dressed as a man at the masked ball with Léon.

Emma’s efforts to invent herself as a romantic heroine realize themselves eventually in adultery. With Rodolphe, Emma adopts the role she has sought to play ever since her disappointing marriage to Charles, ever since meeting Léon:

She kept saying to herself: ‘I have a lover! A lover!’, savouring this idea just as if a second puberty had come upon her. At last, she was to know the pleasures of love, that fever of happiness which she had despaired of. She was entering something marvellous where everything would be passion, ecstasy, delirium;