Imagined Human Beings

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At first glance *Madame Bovary* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* may not seem to have much in common, but from a Horneyan perspective they are interesting to compare. Emma and Henchard are both restless, aspiring people who demand a great deal from life and whose search for glory leads them to behave in self-destructive ways. Their sufferings are treated with sympathy, but they are criticized for the character flaws that bring misery to themselves and others. The dominant solution in each novel is detachment, with Hardy’s being expressed primarily through his celebration of Elizabeth-Jane and Flaubert’s through the narrator’s voice and a variety of ironic devices. Both authors seem to be disillusioned romantics who need to defend themselves against the dissonance between desire and reality. Since the pursuit of happiness exposes us to such pain, it is better to see through the vanity of human wishes and expect little from life.

Like Hardy, Flaubert has not received due credit for his genius in mimetic characterization. During the composition of *Madame Bovary* he wrote to Louise Colet, “The reader will not notice, I hope, all the psychological work hidden under the form, but he will sense its effect” (De Man 1965, 317). This wish has been granted. Although Emma Bovary is one of the most celebrated characters in literature, Flaubert’s “psychological work” has gone largely unnoticed. A Horneyan approach will help us to recover Flaubert’s psychological intuitions and to appreciate the brilliance of his portrait of Emma.

Because we have detailed accounts of their childhoods, we can readily understand the compensatory needs that lead characters like Pip and Jane Eyre to idealize themselves and embark upon searches for glory. We know almost nothing about Emma Bovary’s childhood, however, and her need for glory, like Henchard’s, is an aspect of her character that is simply there when we meet her. In the fullest psychological study of the
novel to date, Giles Mitchell tries to explain Emma's romanticism as the product of "pathological narcissism," "a personality disorder characterized by intense, excessive, and sometimes fatal devotion to the ego-ideal" (1987, 107). Her narcissism is "a flight from humanness, from mortality and bodily vulnerability, from being-in-the-world" (115). Although Flaubert seems to suggest "that Emma's falsely romantic ideals derive from her reading," Mitchell contends that they "were formed in response to something far more existential" (116). The problem with Mitchell's view of Emma as "a universal figure" (125) is that we are all confronted with our human limitations, but we do not all respond like Madame Bovary.

Nonetheless, I think Mitchell is correct in saying that Emma's destructive "ideals" are not just caused by her reading. Flaubert's detailed description of the influences to which she is exposed during her stay in the convent leaves us with the impression that her romanticism is the product of these influences and that her frustration results from the contrast between the bourgeois existence to which she is destined and the unrealistic expectations that have been fostered by the "tantalizing phantasmagoria of sentimental realities" (I, vi) to which she has been exposed.¹ But influence is always a matter of interaction between external stimuli and individual psychology, and there must be something in Emma's character that makes her so responsive to romantic elements in her culture.

I believe that Emma has a narcissistic personality, but in Karen Horney's sense of that term rather than in Freud's or in that of the self and existential psychologists cited by Mitchell. For Horney, narcissism is a reactive rather than a primary phenomenon, and an inability to come to terms with the human condition is a product of grandiosity rather than a cause of it. Self-idealization occurs in all the solutions Horney describes, but whereas most people develop an idealized image to compensate for feelings of weakness, inadequacy, and low self-esteem, as do Pip and Jane Eyre, narcissists derive an exalted conception of themselves from the admiration and indulgence of others. Horney observes that the narcissist "often is gifted beyond average, early and easily won distinctions, and sometimes was the favored and admired child" (1950, 194). Emma Bovary was an only child, and what little information we have suggests that she was indulged by her father, who thought her "too clever for farming" (I, iii). She develops a sense of superiority to her surroundings, to which she makes little effort to accommodate herself.
By the time Emma goes to school at the convent, she has a vague idea of herself as an exceptional being who is destined for glorious things. "The comparisons of betrothed, husband, celestial lover, and eternal marriage" that she hears repeated in sermons stir "within her soul depths of unexpected sweetness" (I, vi) because, like the images she finds in novels, ballads, and keepsakes, and on the painted plates depicting the story of one of Louis XIV's mistresses, they give shape to her aspirations for an exalted existence.

These aspirations take a variety of forms. Emma is drawn to religion by "the mystic languor exhaled in the perfumes of the altar" and "the sonorous lamentations of romantic melancholy re-echoing through the world and eternity!" (I, vi). Christ, whom she would wed if she became a nun, is the first of her phantom lovers. Novels, romantic ballads, history, and paintings stock her mind with images of persecuted ladies, brave gentlemen, famous women of the past, impossibly exotic places, and exquisite scenes of love. These "pictures of the world," as Flaubert ironically describes them, provide material from which she forms idealized images of herself and also of her life, of the kind of lover, home, furnishings, clothes, travel, friends, and experiences she ought to have.

As is characteristic of the narcissistic person, Emma has lofty claims but relatively weak shoulds. Because Horneyan narcissists are their idealized selves, they are not driven by punitive inner dictates into trying to become what they feel they ought to be. Their object is not to actualize their idealized image but rather to hold onto it, to confirm the sense of specialness they already have. One of their primary means of doing this is to insist on their claims, which they feel the world must eventually honor. Even if their claims are being frustrated at the moment, they feel assured of future glory if they continue to assert them. Because they have "an unquestioned belief" in their "greatness and uniqueness" and in the power of their claims, narcissists have a "buoyancy and perennial youthfulness," a "resiliency" in the face of disappointment, that is lacking in the other groups (Horney 1950, 194). Although her dreams are repeatedly crushed, Emma retains her "ever young illusions" (II, xii).

But beneath their surface optimism, narcissists experience "undercurrents of despondency and pessimism" (Horney 1950, 196). While Emma keeps rebounding from her disappointments, in the intervals she has intense feelings of rage and despair. One reason for the narcissist's pessimism is that "measuring by the yardstick of infinitude, of the attainment of fantastic happiness, he cannot help sensing a painful
disparity in his life.” Since he is not given to conscious self-doubts, he feels that “the discrepancy is not in him but in life as such. Thus he may see a tragic quality to life, not the one that does exist but the one which he brings to it.” This seems to me a more accurate description of Emma than Mitchell’s version of her as a universal figure suffering from existential problems.

From a Horneyan perspective, then, *Madame Bovary* is the story of a woman whose romantic dreams are the product of an interaction between the phantasmagoria of sentimental realities she encounters in her culture and a narcissistic personality that makes her highly responsive to such influences. Although she is repeatedly disillusioned, she is extraordinarily resilient and soon finds a new dream. Her search for glory takes a variety of forms, as she swings from one solution to another. She becomes more and more self-destructive as her desperation grows and increasingly divorced from reality in her pursuit of escapes and consolations.

*Madame Bovary* may seem to be very different from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in that Hardy’s attitudes toward his characters are evident whereas Flaubert is famous for his rhetorical restraint. “Nowhere in my book,” he wrote to Louise Colet, “must the author express his emotions or his opinions” (De Man 1965, 311). Earlier he had written, “No lyricism, no comments, the author’s personality absent” (310). I think that Flaubert is deluding himself about his personality being absent, but a surprising number of critics have agreed with him. According to Sainte-Beuve, “The novelist refrains from taking sides; he is present only in order to watch, to reveal and to say everything, but not even his profile appears in a single corner of the novel” (De Man 1965, 327). Erich Auerbach contrasts Flaubert with Stendhal and Balzac, in whose works “we frequently . . . hear what the writer thinks of his characters and events” (1957, 428). In *Madame Bovary*, the writer “expresses no opinion and makes no comment” (429). I believe that the implied author’s attitudes and judgments are very much present in this novel, which is highly rhetorical. Flaubert not only portrays but satirizes Emma’s search for glory.

An author is present in a novel not only in comments (which Flaubert, in fact, makes with some frequency) but also in his arrangement of the materials. One of Flaubert’s favorite rhetorical devices is to mock Em-
ma’s dreams by showing the contrast between her illusions and the truth. He often lets us know in advance that Emma is out of touch with reality and is bound to be disappointed. Although Emma is the subject of the novel, the first two chapters are largely devoted to Charles, and one of their functions is to make us aware of Emma’s mistake in idealizing him before she is aware of it herself. Charles is introduced as an awkward boy wearing an absurd cap who is made to conjugate *ridiculus sum* twenty times on his first day at school. A mediocre student, he must work very hard to stay in the middle of the class. Dominated by his mother and then by his first wife, he is a pathetic figure who could never satisfy Emma’s craving for a gallant lover, or at least a distinguished husband.

Another function of the introductory chapters is to establish the basic pattern of the novel, which is that of foolish hopes followed by disappointment. This is a novel neither of education nor of vindication; it is, like *Vanity Fair*, a novel of disenchantment (see Paris 1974). Charles’s father, a retired assistant-surgeon-major, takes advantage of his fine figure to “get hold of a dowry of sixty thousand francs in the person of a hosier’s daughter who had fallen in love with his good looks” (I, i). He spends money recklessly, becomes indignant when his father-in-law dies leaving little, and fails in the textile business and farming. He then withdraws from the world, “soured, eaten up with regrets, cursing his luck, jealous of everyone.” He cares nothing for his wife and is annoyed by her servile adoration. As a result, the once “lively,” “expansive,” and “affectionate” woman becomes “ill-tempered, grumbling, irritable.” She transfers all her “broken little vanities” to her son and dreams “of high station” for him. Although we are only a few pages into the novel, we have already seen enough of Charles to know that his mother will be disappointed.

Charles’s story, too, is part of the pattern of disenchantment. After he finally passes his examination and is ready to enter practice, his mother arranges a marriage with a forty-five-year-old widow who has an income of twelve hundred francs. Despite the fact that Madame Dubuc is “ugly, as dry as a bone, her face with as many pimples as the spring has buds,” Charles welcomes the marriage as “the advent of an easier life” in which “he would be more free to do as he liked with himself and his money” (I, i). His wife is master, however, and the marriage is miserable. When he returns home in the evening, she “stretche[s] forth two long thin arms from beneath the sheets, put[s] them round his neck,” and complains
that he is neglecting her. She turns out not to be rich, and Charles’s father accuses his wife “of having caused the misfortune of their son by harnessing him to such a harridan” (I, iii). It is no wonder that Charles is attracted to Emma during his visits to the Bertaux. He is caught up in a romantic dream that is the most tenacious, perhaps, in the novel, since he remains blind to Emma’s betrayals and pants “like an adolescent under the vague desires of love” even after his wife has died and he has learned the truth about her (III, xi). Flaubert keeps us aware throughout of the folly of Charles’s love, of disparity between his adoration of Emma and her scorn of him.

Emma’s story begins with a series of disenchantments. In the convent, she is swept up by the romance of religion and seems destined to become a nun, but she rebels against the mysteries of the faith, and its discipline, “as something alien” to her sensuous, self-indulgent nature (I, vi). She thinks she has achieved glory when her mother dies and she engages in romantic excesses of grief. Her father is afraid she is ill, but Emma is “secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of delicate lives, never attained by mediocre hearts.” Emma soon grows tired of her grief, however, and is “surprised to feel herself consoled.” When she returns home, she relishes the pleasure of ruling over the servants, but this, too, soon passes. Growing “disgusted with the country,” she becomes nostalgic for the convent. She thinks herself “quite disillusioned, with nothing more to learn, and nothing more to feel,” when she is roused from her apathy by Charles, whose presence “sufficed to make her believe that she at last felt that wondrous passion which, till then, like a great bird with rose-coloured wings, hung in the splendour of poetic skies.” Marriage leads to her greatest disappointment so far. She had thought herself in love, but “since the happiness that should have followed failed to come,” she concludes that she must have been mistaken and tries to find out what one means exactly “by the words bliss, passion, ecstasy, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books” (I, v).

It is impossible to separate the psychological portrait of Emma from Flaubert’s attitude toward her, since in this novel rhetoric and mimesis are often indistinguishable. A surprising number of critics feel that Flaubert presents Emma as a superior being who is the victim of a bourgeois society that is discordant with the fineness of her nature. Flaubert satirizes the mediocrity, materialism, and dreariness of bourgeois life, to be sure, but he also ridicules Emma’s romanticism, which he presents as
equally conventional and full of clichés. To “taste the full sweetness” of her honeymoon,

it would no doubt have been necessary to fly to those lands with sonorous names where the days after marriage are full of the most suave laziness! In post-chaises behind blue silken curtains, one rides slowly up steep roads, listening to the song of the postilion re-echoed by the mountains, along with the bells of goats and the muffled sound of a waterfall. At sunset on the shores of gulfs one breathes in the perfume of lemon-trees; then in the evening on the villa-terraces above, one looks hand in hand at the stars, making plans for the future. It seemed to her that certain places on earth must bring happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, and that cannot thrive elsewhere. Why could not she lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage, with a husband dressed in a black velvet coat with long tails, and thin shoes, a pointed hat and frills? (I, vii)

There are many such passages that portray and mock Emma simultaneously.

It is above all her husband that Emma finds wanting, since he does not correspond to her romantic conception of a man. A man should “know everything, excel in manifold activities, initiate you into the energies of passion, the refinements of life”; but Charles can “neither swim, nor fence, nor shoot, and one day he could not explain some term of horsemanship to her that she had come across in a novel” (I, vii). She wants to “experience love with him” in “accord with the theories she believed right,” and, in a comic scene, she recites to him by moonlight in the garden “all the passionate rhymes” she knows by heart and sings “many melancholy adagios.” But she finds herself “as calm after this as before, and Charles seem[s] neither more amorous, nor more moved.” She decides that his “passion [is] no longer very ardent.”

Flaubert explains, however, that Emma is incapable “of understanding what she did not experience or of believing anything that did not take on a conventional form” (I, vii); and he shows that despite his limitations, Charles loves Emma with a passion that might have gratified her had she been able to recognize it:

In bed, in the morning, by her side, on the pillow, he watched the sunlight sinking into the down on her fair cheek, half hidden by the ribbons of her nightcap. Seen thus closely, her eyes looked to him enlarged, especially when, on waking up, she opened and shut her eyelids rapidly many times.
Black in the shade, dark blue in broad daylight, they had, as it were, depths of successive colors that, more opaque in the center, grew more transparent towards the surface of the eye. His own eyes lost themselves in these depths and he could see himself mirrored in miniature, down to his shoulders, with his scarf round his head and the top of his shirt open.

(I, v)

This is the romantic love of an unromantic lover, one who wears a scarf round his head. As Charles rides off after breakfast, he reproaches himself for not loving Emma enough, turns back, and runs "up the stairs with a beating heart." He cannot "keep from constantly touching her comb, her rings, her scarf." Sometimes he gives her "great sounding kisses" on her cheeks, "or else little kisses in a row all along her bare arm from the tip of her fingers up to her shoulder." Because Charles's love does not take the form her reading has led her to expect, it fails to register on Emma, who suffers from ennui and begins to fantasize what life would have been like with the man of her dreams.

Emma's visit to Vaubyessard gives her for the first time a taste of the life she feels she deserves. She is spellbound by the social elegance and material refinements of this world, but Flaubert subverts her view of it by calling attention to its sordid features. Emma is fascinated by the Marquis' father-in-law because "he had lived at court and slept in the beds of queens" (I, viii). Flaubert depicts him as a revolting old man who has "lived a life of loud dissipation" and now sits eating like a child, "letting drops of gravy drop" from his "hanging lips." To Emma, the people at the ball are like figures out of her dreams; she wants "to know their lives," "to blend with them." Flaubert describes the "indifferent eyes" of the men as having "the appeased expression of daily-satiated passions" and observes that through "all their gentleness of manner pierced that peculiar brutality that stems from a steady command over half-tame things, for the exercise of one's strength and the amusement of one's vanity—the handling of thoroughbred horses and the society of loose women."

When Emma returns to Tostes, she dwells on the memory of the ball, and although the details fade, a "wistful feeling remain[s]" (I, viii). She imagines that the green silk cigar-case Charles had found belonged to the Viscount with whom she had danced and weaves a romance around it that sets her dreaming of Paris. Her fantasies are again quite conventional, and Flaubert's depiction of them is satirical. In the world of high society, as Emma imagines it, the duchesses are all pale, and they all get
up at four in the afternoon. The men all have “talents hidden under a frivolous appearance” and ride “horses to death at pleasure parties” (I, ix). In the bohemian quarter, writers and actresses are “prodigal as kings, full of ambitious ideals and fantastic frenzies. They [live] far above all others, among the storms that rage between heaven and earth, partaking of the sublime.”

In an effort to maintain a sense of connection with Vaubyessard and the Paris of her dreams, Emma begins the pursuit of elegance and material refinements that ultimately becomes a major cause of her downfall. She turns her servant into a lady’s-maid and buys fashionable clothes, trinkets, and furnishings. She devises new ways of “arranging paper sconces for the candles” and extraordinary names for simple dishes (I, ix). Flaubert comments that “in her wistfulness, she confused the sensuous pleasures of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment.”

Emma feels that, despite his coarseness, marriage to Charles would be tolerable if he were at least “one of those silently determined men who work at their books all night, and at last . . . wear a string of medals on their ill-fitting black coat” (I, ix). Thwarted in her dreams of romantic love and a glamorous social life, Emma craves “this name of Bovary, which was hers, to be illustrious, to see it displayed at the booksellers’, repeated in the newspapers, known to all France.” Emma’s search for glory could take the form of identifying with Charles if he were the kind of man who could feed her pride, but he is unambitious and even tells her how he has been humiliated in a consultation with another doctor. Full of rage and shame, she feels “a wild desire to strike him.” It injures her pride to bear his name, and she displaces onto him her anger with herself for having married him. His mediocrity is so threatening to Emma because it represents her despised image, what she could not bear to become. His presence is a constant reminder of the disparity between what is and what ought to be.

We can see some of Flaubert’s fine psychological work in his portrayal of Emma’s reactions when she feels she has nowhere to turn in her effort to escape her unbearable existence. At first she waits for an “act of fortune” (I, ix) that will transform her life, but nothing happens, and when her hopes for another ball at Vaubyessard are dashed, she despairs: “The future was a dark corridor, with its door at the end shut tight.” Life seems meaningless to Emma unless she has the prospect of some form of glory that will confirm her idealized image of herself. She gives
up music: "Since she could never, in a velvet gown with short sleeves, striking with her light fingers the ivory keys of an Erard concert piano, feel the murmur of ecstasy envelop her like a breeze, it was not worth while boring herself with practicing.” She gives up drawing, embroidery, and reading as well and finds herself lonely and bored. Feeling hopeless, she lets everything go: “She who was formerly so careful, so dainty, now spent whole days without dressing, wore grey cotton stockings, and used tallow candles to light the house.” She grows “difficult, capricious,” and “no longer conceal[s] her contempt” for the people around her. She experiences mood swings and suffers from psychosomatic symptoms that Charles cannot cure.

Emma’s behavior is not entirely the result of despair. Her suffering is an expression of rage at having her claims denied. She feels that she is “the equal of all the women who were living happily. She had seen duchesses at Vaubyessard with clumsier waists and commoner ways, and she hated the divine injustice of God” (I, ix). Emma’s bargain with fate is evident here. Because of her beauty and refinement, she deserves a luxurious life, and her misery is a protest against the unfairness of her lot. She is showing the world what it has done to her. Accepting her lot would mean giving up her claims, whereas suffering is a way of holding onto them, of compelling fate by demonstrating that life is intolerable as it is. Emma’s suffering is, finally, a manipulative technique, one that succeeds in bringing about a change. She is suffering at God, at the world, and especially at Charles, who is driven to give up his flourishing practice in an effort to alleviate her misery. As soon as he mentions the idea of leaving Tostes, Emma drinks “vinegar to lose weight, contract[s] a little cough, and [loses] all appetite.” Her palpitations are real, but this passage suggests that some of her other behavior may also be contrived.

One of Emma’s most persistent illusions is that her misery is entirely the result of external conditions and that happiness comes from without, is granted by fortune or found. While she has no recognition of the internal sources of her frustration, for Flaubert, as for Hardy in The Mayor of Casterbridge, character is fate. He emphasizes Emma’s inner emptiness, her superficiality, and her unrealistic expectations. The life she dreams of does not exist in the world and would not be worth having if it did. Emma thinks that things are bound to be better in a new place, but through his description of Yonville-l’Abbaye before her arrival, Flaubert
once again lets us know that she is deluding herself. The land is poor, the cheese is bad, the decaying church has neither organ nor stained glass, and there is only one street, which is “a gunshot long and flanked by a few shops” (II, i). The town is as dreary as Tostes. Things do change for Emma, however, in that she meets new people, first Léon and then Rodolphe, on whom to focus her dreams.

In the midst of her misery at Tostes, Emma longs for a life of adventure, “for masked balls, for shameless pleasures that were bound, she thought, to initiate her to ecstasies she had not yet experienced” (I, ix). But, although she longs for shameless pleasures, she is not yet ready to engage in them. Indeed, she hopes that her child will be a male so that she can fulfill her desires through him: “a man, at least, is free; he can explore all passions and all countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most distant pleasures” (II, iii). A woman is “always drawn by some desire, restrained by some rule of conduct.” Emma dreams of revenging “all her impotence” by having a son, but this hope is shattered when she gives birth to a girl.

Although Emma feels that she would be able to follow her dreams if only she were a man, Flaubert’s linking her with Léon suggests that he sees her temperament rather than her gender as the primarily source of her plight. Many critics regard Emma as vastly superior to Léon, but Flaubert presents them as kindred spirits, with Léon showing, perhaps, what Emma might have been like had she been a male. The two experience an immediate rapport when they discover that they both love sublime landscapes, dreamy music, and “stories that rush breathlessly along” (II, ii). Emma expresses scorn for “commonplace heroes and moderate feelings, as one finds them in nature,” and Léon assents: “since these works fail to touch the heart, they miss, it seems to me, the true end of art. It is so sweet, amid all the disenchantments of life, to be able to dwell in thought upon noble characters, pure affections, and pictures of happiness.” Both are bored, disillusioned romantics who feel wasted in the provinces and console themselves by escaping into imaginary worlds. They share the same stock of superficial tastes and sentimental clichés. Léon is enchanted by Emma’s elegance, and she notices “his nails, which were longer than one wore them in Yonville. It was one of the clerk’s chief concerns to trim them, and for this purpose he kept a special knife in his writing-desk.” (II, iii). Each sees in the other a means of escaping a mundane existence, and both are caught between desire and fear.
Her love for Léon, and his for her, throws Emma into conflict. Deliriously happy, she wants to consummate their relationship, but, restrained by rules of conduct, she represses her desire and finds another path to glory by resisting temptation and becoming a model wife and mother. She goes to church regularly, brings Berthe home from the nurse, and warms Charles’s slippers by the fire. The object of everyone’s admiration, she seems “to be passing through life scarcely touching it, bearing on her brow the slight mark of a sublime destiny” (II, v). She fears that she has lost Léon by repulsing him too much, but the “pride, the joy of being able to say to herself, ‘I am virtuous,’ and to look at herself in the mirror striking resigned poses” consoles her in some degree “for the sacrifice she [thinks] she [is] making.”

Emma’s virtue is unreal, another romantic pose, but so, Flaubert makes clear, is her love. She thinks she is making a sacrifice. She seeks solitude in order to delight in Léon’s image, but “his physical presence trouble[s] the voluptuousness of this meditation” (II, v). She thrills “at the sound of his step,” but, to her astonishment and sorrow, the emotion subsides when he appears. Emma is sacrificing an unreal love in order to glory in a pretended virtue. She feels victimized by fate because she did not meet Léon before she married Charles, but Flaubert suggests that if she had, he would not have satisfied her either. No real man can compete with her imaginary lovers.

Beneath her pose of serene virtue, Emma is “eaten up with desires, with rage, with hate” (II, v). She bewails “the clothes she did not have, the happiness she had missed, her overexalted dreams, her too cramped home.” It is Flaubert, presumably, who sees her dreams as “overexalted.” As at Tostes, she cultivates her suffering, but this time Charles is oblivious of her torment, and she hates him for his conviction that he is making her happy. She consoles herself with “wild extravagance” and has “shocking thoughts” of adultery and revenge, but she is still restrained by rules of conduct, and a “dark, shapeless chasm” opens within her at the thought of fleeing with Léon. Her realization that there is no relief from her misery leaves her “shattered, exhausted, frozen, sobbing silently, with flowing tears.” Her attempt to find consolation in religion does not succeed, and after Léon’s departure for Paris, “the evil days of Tostes [begin] again” (II, vii). Filled with “a numb despair,” Emma regrets “her sterile virtue.” She spends money lavishly, becomes increasingly unstable, and develops psychosomatic ailments. Her despair
is so great that she reacts with indifference when she begins to spit blood: "what does it matter?"

Emma’s spirits are revived by the attentions of Rodolphe, who seems to be exactly the kind of man for whom she has been looking. Once again, Flaubert creates ironic effects by showing us in advance that Emma is bound to be disappointed. Rodolphe is a calculating seducer who worries about “how to get rid of her afterwards” before he begins the relationship (II, vii). Emma and Léon were truly kindred spirits, but Rodolphe plays the role of the melancholy romantic because he knows it appeals to her. Bemoaning “provincial mediocrity, . . . the lives it stifles, the lost illusions,” he tells Emma that he is “sinking in gloom” and longs to join those who are lying in moonlit graveyards (II, viii). He may have had an aim in life if only he had met a woman he could love, and he clings to the belief that one day happiness will come. When one is near despair, a voice suddenly cries, “‘It is here!’ You feel the need of confiding the whole of your life, of giving everything, sacrificing everything to this person.” There is “no need for explanations” because the other has been met “before in dreams.” Sensing Emma’s desperation, Rodolphe easily manipulates her by employing the romantic clichés for which she is looking and presenting himself as the man of her dreams.

Rodolphe differs from Léon not only in cynically exploiting a romanticism he does not really share, but also in enabling Emma to resolve the conflict between rules of conduct and her desires. One’s real duty, he says, is not to “accept all the conventions of society with the hypocrisy it forces upon us” but to “cherish the beautiful,” “to feel what is great” (II, viii). The passions are “the one beautiful thing on earth, the source of heroism, of enthusiasm, of poetry, music, the arts.” When Emma objects that one must accept the world’s morality to some extent, Rodolphe distinguishes between two moralities: “the petty one, the morality of small men,” and the eternal morality that governs people like them. In the petty morality, the “noblest feelings, the purest feelings are persecuted,” but the eternal morality sanctions a beautiful passion like theirs that had its origin “in some previous state of existence” (II, viii). Her moral qualms allayed, Emma plunges into the affair, which becomes a source of pride rather than of shame.

For the first time since her mother’s death, Emma feels that she has succeeded in rising above the mediocrity that surrounds her. Before the
affair is consummated, Rodolphe flatters her skillfully, telling her that although he has tried to stay away he cannot “struggle against Heaven; it is impossible to resist the smile of angels; one is carried away by the beautiful, the lovely, the adorable” (II, ix). Emma’s pride unfolds “languidly in the warmth of this language, like someone stretching in a hot bath.” After the affair is consummated, Emma feels neither anxiety nor remorse but rather that she has fulfilled at last “the love-dream of her youth” (II, ix). She sees herself as having joined the “lyric legion” of adulterous women about whom she has read and feels that she no longer need envy them. She is to know the “joys of love” at last, “that fever of happiness of which she had so despaired!” For the first time in her life, her dream of glory seems attainable. She feels herself surrounded by a blue space, with “ordinary existence” appearing “only intermittently between these heights, dark and far away beneath her.” It has been Emma’s object to separate herself from ordinary existence, and now she looks down on it from the heights of her illusory grandeur.

Emma has experienced what Karen Horney calls a vindictive triumph. She felt, says Flaubert, “a satisfaction of revenge. How she had suffered! But she had won out at last” (II, ix). She has revenged herself on an uncomprehending world by defying its moral code and gaining the happiness it wished to deny her. And she has had her revenge on Charles as well, whose mediocrity has been so humiliating. Another feature of a vindictive triumph is proving one’s true grandiosity. Emma has been in despair when it has seemed that her claims would never be fulfilled, but they have been honored at last, validating her bargain and confirming her exalted conception of herself. She so conflates reality with her dreams that she conducts her affair in a reckless manner, feeling no concern for discovery, and exercises caution only at Rodolphe’s insistence.

When Rodolphe becomes bored and takes her for granted, Emma is disenchanted once more and knows “what it [is] to repent” (II, x). Reviewing her life, she mourns all her lost illusions, but she is soon caught up in a new dream of glory when Homais proposes the operation on Hippolyte. She urges Charles on in the hope that “his reputation and fortune will be increased” and that she will have something “more solid” to lean on “than love” (II, xi). But the operation fails, and Emma is humiliated by the fact that “she, who was so intelligent—could have allowed herself to be deceived again.” The remnants of her virtue crum-
ble “away beneath the furious blows of her pride,” and she resumes her affair with Rodolphe.

Her relationship with Rodolphe is characterized now by a morbid dependency in which she abases herself and glorifies him: “I am your servant, your concubine! You are my king, my idol! You are good, you are beautiful, you are clever, you are strong!” (II, xii). Emma transfers her pride to Rodolphe and seeks to exalt herself by merging with him. One of her objects in proposing that they elope is to bind him to her in a mutual dependency: “You are everything I have, and I’ll be everything to you. I’ll be your family, your country; I’ll look after you.” “The longer we live together,” she proclaims, “the more it will be like an embrace, every day closer, more complete.” This prospect is unbearably oppressive to a detached person like Rodolphe, who values his freedom and “holds back his emotions in any engagement.” The more fiercely Emma clings to him, the more inevitable it becomes that he will abandon her.

As we have seen, Emma’s search for glory takes many forms: she tries to confirm her idealized conception of herself through religious fervor, romantic love, devotion to duty, and her husband’s achievements. As each solution fails, she turns to another, or she escapes into memories, reading, and dreams. When nothing works and the future looks hopeless, her rage and despair lead to inconsistent behavior, cynicism, and psychosomatic illnesses. Through almost all of these changes, Emma has a persistent desire for material refinements, which are a symbol of the exalted existence she craves.

After Rodolphe abandons her, Emma has a momentary impulse toward suicide and then retreats from a life she cannot bear into a long and serious illness. When she receives the sacrament at the height of her illness, her search for glory revives. She feels herself “mounting toward God” and faints “with celestial joy as she advance[s] her lips to accept the body of the Saviour presented to her” (II, xiv). She hears “the music of seraphic harps” and perceives God “on a golden throne” ordering “angels with wings of fire to carry her away in their arms.” As she recovers, she tries to hold onto this “splendid vision” and aspires “to become a saint”: “Her soul, tortured by pride, at length found rest in Christian humility, and tasting the joy of weakness, she saw within
herself the destruction of her will opening wide the gates for heavenly grace to conquer her.”

Flaubert satirizes this religious phase as another form of romanticism in which submission to God replaces Emma’s wish to merge with Rodolphe. As she kneels on her Gothic prié-Dieu, she addresses “to the Lord the same suave words that she had murmured formerly to her lover in the outpourings of adultery” (II, xiv). Through Christian humility she hopes to gain “a bliss that can replace happiness,” a love that will “grow forever!” Emma feels she has found a celestial lover who will raise her to the heights and whom she can control through humility and self-abnegation. She is not really humble, of course, but takes “pride [in] her devoutness,” comparing herself “to those grand ladies of long ago whose glory she had dreamed of” and “who, trailing with so much majesty the lace-trimmed trains of their long gowns, retired into solitude to shed at the feet of Christ the tears of hearts that life had wounded.” She “fancie[s] herself seized with the finest Catholic melancholy ever conceived by an ethereal soul.”

In the absence of earthly delights, Emma wearies of religion and arises from her prayers “with aching limbs and the vague feeling that she [is] being cheated” (II, xiv). With the failure of this solution, she is once again torn by inner conflicts between resignation, aggression, and a wish to be good. Wrapping “all things in the same mood of indifference,” she combines “gentleness of speech with such haughty looks” that one can “no longer distinguish selfishness from charity, or corruption from virtue.”

When Charles takes her to see Lucia di Lammermoor, Emma’s dream of love is reawakened. She feels herself “carried back to the reading of her youth, into the midst of Sir Walter Scott” (II, xv). As Lucie longs for wings, Emma, too, wants “to flee away from life, locked in a passionate embrace.” In Lucie’s “melodious lamentations,” she recognizes “all the intoxication and the anguish that had brought her close to death,” but she feels that, unlike Lucie, she has never been loved by the right man. Once she married Charles there was bound to be conflict between desire and rules of conduct; but if “before the degradation of marriage and the disillusion of adultery, she could have anchored her life upon some great, strong heart,” she believes that all her needs could have been met: “virtue, affection, sensuous pleasure, and duty would have combined to give her eternal bliss.”

Once again, Flaubert mocks Emma’s illusion, and, indeed, for a mo-
ment she sees through it herself. She realizes that the bliss of which she
dreams is “a lie, a mockery to taunt desire” (II, xv). Knowing “how
small the passions [are] that art magnifie[s],” she strives for “detach-
ment” and smiles “inwardly in scornful pity” when the hero reappears.
But her “critical detachment” is quickly “swept away by the poetic
power of the acting; and, drawn to the man by the illusion of the part,”
she begins to imagine the “extraordinary, magnificent” life of the tenor,
Edgar Lagardy, “the life that could have been hers” if only fate had
brought them together. She would have traveled with him through all
the kingdoms of Europe, sharing his triumphs and being the sole object
of his desire. She becomes possessed by the “mad idea” that he is looking
at her now, and she longs to run into his arms, crying out “Take me
away! . . . All my passion and all my dreams are yours!” In his character-
istic way, Flaubert makes us aware of Emma’s self-deception by having
previously described Edgar Lagardy as a “charlatan type, in which there
was something of the hairdresser.”

Meeting Léon at the opera, Emma soon transfers her romantic dreams
to him. Flaubert’s account of their dialogue is deliciously comic. Emma
expatiates “on the frailty of earthly affections, and the eternal isolation
that stifles the human heart”; and Léon, “to show off, or in a naive
imitation of this melancholy,” declares that he has been “dreadfully
despondent” (III, i). Both speak of what they have dreamed and what
they have suffered, and Emma says that there would be some consolation
if her pain could at least be of use to others. At this, Léon starts “off in
praise of virtue, duty, and silent immolation, having himself an incredible
longing for self-sacrifice.” Emma would like to work in a hospital as a
nursing Sister, and Léon praises the “holy vocation” of doctor. Emma
wishes she had died in her illness, and Léon is “quick to express his own
longing for ‘the quiet of the tomb.’ ” Listening to Léon, Emma feels her
existence expand: “it was like some sentimental immensity to which she
had returned.”

Emma’s relationship with Léon follows a predictable course. No man
has “ever seemed to her so beautiful” (III, i), and, although she fears
things might change, she feels once again that her dream is coming true.
To Léon, she is “the mistress of all novels, the heroine of all the dramas,
the vague ‘she’ of all the volumes of verse” (III, v). After an idyllic
interval, full of romantic clichés, disenchantment sets in. When Léon
allows himself to be delayed by Homais, he seems to Emma “incapable
of heroism, weak, banal, more spiritless than a woman, avaricious and
timorous as well” (III, vi). On his side, Léon resents Emma’s domination and the “increased absorption of his personality into hers.” It was as though he were her mistress, observes Flaubert, rather than she his. Since he is soon to become head clerk, he feels it is time to settle down, to give up “his exalted sentiments, his poetic imagination.” “In the flush of his youth,” says Flaubert, “every bourgeois” has “believed himself capable of immense passions, of lofty enterprises. . . . every notary bears within him the débris of a poet.” Emma differs from Léon in the persistence of her youthful illusions, but Flaubert does not present her “exalted sentiments” as any less ludicrous than his.

Becoming “as sick of [Léon] as he [is] weary of her,” Emma wonders “how to get rid of him” (III, vi), much as Rodolphe had wondered how to get rid of her. She becomes reckless in her behavior and lascivious in her love-making in a desperate effort to keep her passion alive, but she destroys “every pleasure by always wishing for it to be too great.” Disappointed again by life, she reads lurid novels in order to gain vicarious excitement and sees another man in her mind’s eye while writing to Léon. He is “a phantom fashioned out of her most ardent memories, of her favorite books, her strongest desires.” Her phantom lover becomes “so real, so tangible” that she feels he will “ravish her entire being in a kiss.”

Emma’s affair involves her in an elaborate tissue of lies and contributes to her undoing by plunging her more deeply into debt. She borrows to pay for her trysts with Léon and rejects his suggestion that they meet at a less expensive hotel. It is her luxurious habits, more than anything else, that ultimately lead to her downfall. She needs to surround herself with material refinements in order to confirm her sense of grandeur and avoid the feeling that she is sinking into the mire of ordinary life. Her various forms of romanticism are linked in her mind with elegant accoutrements. Love seems inseparable “from boudoirs with silken curtains and thick carpets, well-filled flower stands, . . . the flashing of precious stones and the golden braid of liveries” (I, ix). When she aspires to become a saint, she buys rosaries, wears holy medals, and wishes to have by her bed “a reliquary set in emeralds” (II, xiv). The romance of motherhood is spoiled before Berthe is born because she cannot spend as much as she would like “on a suspended cradle with rose silk curtains, and embroidered caps” (II, iii). Emma compulsively buys things as a way of keeping up her morale and “soften[ing] the bitterness of her life” (III, vii). Flaubert meticulously details her pur-
chases after every disappointment. The more her other resources fail her, the more she consoles herself with material luxuries, which are a symbol to her of romantic glamour and social superiority.

Emma’s compensatory needs, combined with her sense of entitlement, lead her to fall prey to Lheureux. Absorbed in her passions and feeling that she deserves the best, she worries “no more about money matters than an archduchess” (III, vi). Lheureux tempts her with goods and easy credit, and as a result of buying, borrowing, and renewing notes, she runs up of debt of eight thousand francs while having only a dim awareness of what she is doing. When her money troubles close in, she deals with them at first by denial, wishful thinking, and longings for escape. She wants “not to be alive,” “to be always asleep,” or “to take wing like a bird, and fly off far away to become young again in the realms of immaculate purity” (III, vii). Finally forced to cope with her debt, Emma employs a series of desperate measures. She appeals to Léon, whom she urges to steal the money, and then to the notary, Monsieur Guillaumin, who insults her by seeking sexual favors. Despite her indignation with him, she makes advances to the timid Binet and finally goes to Rodolphe, “unaware that she was hastening to offer what had so angered her a while ago, not in the least conscious of her prostitution” (III, vii). With Rodolphe’s refusal, her world crumbles, and she feels that she is going mad.

With all her solutions failing, Emma turns, like Hedda Gabler, to suicide. Like Hedda’s, her self-destruction is partly an escape from an intolerable situation and partly a vindictive triumph. Her feeling that she is going mad is a product of both her disappointment in love and her impending financial disaster. Léon has let her down, and Rodolphe, after telling her that he loves her, says that he does not have the money for which she is asking. She had been confident that “one single glance would reawaken” his ardor (III, vi), and at first she seems to have succeeded. Her request for money chills him, however, and the rage and despair Emma felt when he deserted her are revived, along with her profound sense of injustice: she would have “sold all,” would “have begged on the high-roads,” for a smile or a look from him. At first she “suffer[s] only in her love,” but when she returns to Yonville, “her plight, like an abyss, loom[s] before her” (III, viii).

Although her suicide is an escape, and perhaps also a revenge on those who did not take her plight seriously, Emma’s mood is not one of despair. She takes arsenic in “an ecstasy of heroism” that makes her
“almost joyous,” and when no symptoms immediately appear, she believes that death is "but a little thing": "I shall fall asleep and all will be over" (III, viii). Emma is almost joyous because she thinks she has found a way to escape all her suffering in a way that seems glorious to her. She will have fulfilled her duty not to others but to her romantic conception of herself; instead of being a pathetic victim, she will at last have mastered her fate.

Literature is full of protagonists who are granted romantic deaths, who feel that they have actualized their idealized images and then die before they are subject to continued failure, despair, and self-hate. Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra (Paris 1991b), Stendhal’s Julien Sorel (Paris 1974), and Conrad’s Lord Jim (Paris 1974) come to mind; and there are many others, including Antigone, Hedda Gabler, and, as we shall soon see, Edna Pontellier. It is precisely such a death that Flaubert denies Emma Bovary. He describes her physical agony in horrible detail, and the appearance of the hideous blind man shatters the dream of "cestial glory" (III, viii) that had been induced in Emma by the last sacraments. The blind man, who sings of how a young girl loses her virtue by dreaming her heart away, had filled Emma with dread while she was in the midst of her affair with Léon, and when he reappears as she is dying, she is seized by a fear of damnation. At the sound of his "raucous voice," she begins to laugh, an atrocious, frantic, desperate laugh, thinking she saw the hideous face of the poor wretch loom out of the eternal darkness like a menace.

The wind blew very hard that day
It blew her petticoat away.

A final spasm threw her back on the mattress. She had ceased to exist. (III, viii)

At the end, Emma is wedded not to her dream of glory but to her nightmare.

As we have seen, the author’s personality is by no means absent from this novel, as both Flaubert and many critics have claimed it to be. There are numerous authorial comments and a satirical treatment of almost every character and set of values. The primary object of Flaubert’s satire is Emma’s romanticism, which is shown to be foolish, derivative, and
destructive. Many critics feel that Flaubert sympathizes with Emma's frustrations, which are blamed on the meanness of bourgeois society. I think that they are not entirely wrong in sensing that it is not only Emma but also Flaubert who is a thwarted romantic. The implied author has inner conflicts that are evident in his ambivalent attitudes.

While the expansive side of Flaubert empathizes with Emma's craving for glory, his moralistic side condemns her, in rather conventional ways, for her pride and adultery. He describes her as corrupt, degenerate, her soul "all shriveled up, like the duke of Clarence in his butt of malmsey" (II, xii). His account of the priest's administration of extreme unction when Emma is dying reflects orthodox attitudes:

First, upon the eyes, that had so coveted all worldly goods; then upon the nostrils, that had been so greedy of the warm breeze and the scents of love; then upon the mouth, that had spoken lies, moaned in pride and cried out in lust; then upon the hands that had taken delight in the texture of sensuality; and finally upon the soles of the feet, so swift when she had hastened to satisfy her desires. . . . (III, viii)

Flaubert sometimes expresses sympathy with Emma's "poor oppressed heart," but his moral judgment of her is unrelenting and severe. When Charles affects bohemian manners after her death, Flaubert describes Emma as corrupting him from beyond the grave.

The dominant side of Flaubert's personality is, of course, his detachment. This results not in the disappearance of the author but in the presence of a pervasive irony which is his defense against the frustration, humiliation, and despair that are the lot of those who allow themselves to expect very much from life. Those who have extremely limited goals, like Binet, or who aggressively pursue crass ones, like Lheureux and Homais, may succeed; but those who hope for more are bound to be mocked by fate. As author, Flaubert plays the role of fate himself, making fools of his dreamers and rewarding only those whose success is not worth the having. What Emma lacks most of all is the "critical detachment" that she momentarily attains during the intermission at the opera and that leads her to smile "inwardly in scornful pity" when the hero reappears (II, xv). Scornful pity is what Flaubert feels toward Emma through most of the novel.

Seemingly afraid both of himself and of life, Flaubert seeks to become invulnerable by repressing his desires. Emma represents a side of himself that he despises, pities, and fears. He needs to expose her folly again and
again in order to reinforce his own resignation. What he is telling himself through Emma’s story is that there, but for his bitter wisdom, goes he. It is this wisdom in which Flaubert’s pride is invested. He pursues his own search for glory by means of critical detachment. He sees men as the victims of their illusions, the sordidness of society, and the mockery of fate. Like Hardy, he seeks to rise above the common lot by being permanently disillusioned, by despising worldly success, and by escaping the mockery of fate through his own superior irony.

There is one character in the novel whom Flaubert admires. This is Dr. Larivière, who is as glamorous a figure as any Emma creates in her fantasies:

Disdainful of honors, of titles, and of academies, hospitable, generous, fatherly to the poor, and practicing virtue without believing in it, he would almost have passed for a saint if the keenness of his intellect had not caused him to be feared as a demon. His glance, more penetrating than his scalps, looked straight into your soul, and would detect any lie, regardless of how well hidden. He went through life with the benign dignity that goes with the assurance of talent and wealth, with forty years of hard-working, blameless life. (III, viii)

Dr. Larivière is supposed to have been modeled on Flaubert’s father, but he is also an expression, I believe, of Flaubert’s idealized image of himself. He harmonizes Flaubert’s conflicting needs for goodness, greatness, and critical detachment. He has the insight, talent, and wealth that Flaubert possesses but which are denied to Emma. He is Flaubert’s vision of himself as the venerated, disdainful, demonic, benign, dedicated, dignified, and, above all, omniscient artist.