Madame Bovary: A Woman in a Constricted Society

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Virtually every society in the world today presents a constricting environment for women. Limited by their traditional roles of lover, wife, and mother, women often have little or no physical, social, or intellectual freedom of movement. This fact presents a dilemma for those women whose imagination and creativity require outlets other than those society allows them, and it also creates a major conflict for Emma Bovary in Gustave Flaubert’s nineteenth-century novel, *Madame Bovary*.

Emma, the sensitive, young daughter of a well-to-do farmer, turns to romantic novels and tales of chivalry to satisfy her desires for travel and adventure and her hunger for life’s passionate experiences. Her extreme disenchantment with the provincial stifling role she is forced to play, before and after her marriage, leads to tragedy. Emma spends money extravagantly in an effort to create an environment of elegance and refinement. She engages in two adulterous liaisons, neither of which satisfy her longings. Ultimately, faced with exposure and ruin and unable to endure her disappointments, Emma takes her own life. The heroine’s tragic ending is a culmination of both her unrealistic romantic expectations, and the stifling atmosphere for women in nineteenth century France.

For young Emma Bovary, life is a search for “that rare ideal of sensitive
beings to which the common soul cannot aspire” (Flaubert, 52). Her strongest influences in life are the romance novels she reads. When young Emma’s father sends her to a convent, where he hopes his only daughter will be educated in a pious manner, Emma instead acquires a passionate nature which at first embraces the mysticism and romance of religion, then longs for more. When an elderly maid visits Emma each week carrying romantic novels in her pocket, Emma reads them eagerly. The novels portray:

love and lovers, damsels in distress swooning
in lonely lodges, postilions slaughtered all along
in the road, horses ridden to death on every page,
gloomy forests, troubles of the heart, vows, sobs,
tears, kisses, rowing-boats in the moonlight,
nightingales in the grove, gentlemen brave as lions and gentle as lambs, too virtuous to be true,
invariably well dressed, and weeping like fountains.
(Flaubert, 50)

These stories place hopelessly romantic notions into Emma’s head and soon begin to shape her entire personality. Her impressionable adolescent mind casts her in the starring role of each story, feeling each character’s passion and acting out each role. When she attends confession, Emma “invents small sins in order to stay there longer,” simply to fulfill her romantic notions (48). Every ordinary thing becomes picturesque to her. “She loved the sea only for the storms, green foliage
only when it was scattered amid ruins” (49). Any romantic ideal interests Emma. Rebell ing against the discipline and rigor of religion, Emma: “loved the church for its flowers, music for the words of the songs, literature for its passionate excitement” (52). All things had to touch Emma’s heart with some form of emotional fulfillment. These hypersensitive modes of thinking only contribute to Emma’s dissatisfaction with reality, yet they represent the romantic outlook portrayed in all women’s literature of Emma’s day, a strain of which still exists in the romance novels and movies of today.

Through her reading and her fantasizing, Emma creates in her own mind an image of ideal love which can never exist in real life, thus setting the stage for certain disillusionment and heartbreak in the future. These “romantic girlhood dreams” Emma possesses as a woman are a result of such literature (Steegmuller, 256). In fact, the very convent she attends to be a chaste woman provides the catalyst for her adulterous affairs later in life. “By the time she left her convent school, she was corrupted by the nonsense of popular pseudo-Romantic literature and art” (Tillet, 4).

Yet Emma’s fascination with the romantic lifestyle appears not so unusual for any girl or woman in this time period. “Emma was a product of the general
condition of all ‘young ladies’ of good family -- during the nineteenth century -- with lots of dreams, lots of fantasies, no real in-depth knowledge of anything, no professionalism, no diligence” (Maraini, 75). Her books create a reality for Emma which she finds infinitely preferable to the “real” world. In her alternate world, life revolves around aesthetics, not reality. “Dreaming between the lines, she loses her identity in the heroines of the novels she peruses, the mistresses to whom verses are inscribed, the models in the fashion magazines” (Levin, 118). Thus, Emma’s reading of romance novels molds her character in a negative way.

When Charles Bovary, an oafish, unimaginative, but good-natured small town doctor, begins to court Emma, she is so caught up in the romance of being courted and planning a “perfect” wedding that she does not stop and wonder until after she is married who her future husband really is or whether she is truly in love with him.

They look[ed] forward to [the wedding] all through the winter. Mademoiselle Rovault attended to her trousseau, ordering part of it in Rouen, and herself making up some underclothes and nightcaps, from borrowed patterns. Whenever Charles went to visit them they discussed the preparations, wondering in which room to hold the wedding-breakfast, how many dishes would be needed, and what the main ones should be. (Flaubert, 38)
Here Emma exemplifies her “domination of the heart by imagination” (Gilman, 49). She marries because Charles symbolizes romance and escape from the dull routine of her Father’s farm. Filled with passionate notions and longing to be mistress of her own house, Emma marries Charles, “a country doctor -- the kindest, simplest, stupidest of husbands” (James, 59).

Since Emma has really only fallen “in love with love,” for she embraces all of the characteristics of love from her books and yearns for the same love to occur in her own life. Hence, she soon feels dismay that Charles does not live up to her expectations. He cannot “swim, or fence, or fire a pistol, and [he] was unable to explain a riding term she came across in a novel one day” (Flaubert, 54). Inevitably, Emma compares Charles to the heroes of her romantic novels and the sophisticated men reported about in the city journals. She feels let down that her new husband does not illustrate those same qualities which she associates with manhood. Unwilling to admit that she has made an irrevocable error by marrying Charles, Emma tries to make her marriage better, to make herself in love. She reads poetry to Charles in their garden and sings love songs to him, but they “left her as unmoved as before, neither did [they] appear to make Charles more loving or more emotional” (56).
In fact, Emma soon finds Charles not only incapable of sustaining much passion, but also uninterested in doing so. Charles’ “ardours had lapsed in a routine, his embraces kept fixed hours; [sex] ...was just one more habit, a sort of dessert he looked forward to after the monotony of dinner” (56-57). Such a timely schedule for romance only disenchants Emma more with her marriage. Emma tries with increasing desperation to make herself believe she is in love with Charles, yet she only succeeds in convincing herself she has picked the wrong man.

To ease her disappointment and boredom, Emma searches for diversion. She begins to take long walks with her greyhound, Djali, a payment from a gamekeeper Charles had cured. During these walks, Emma begins to fantasize about what would have happened if she had met another man. For Emma was sure, “they weren’t all like this one” (57). Her life continues in this manner until several months later, when the Bovarys’ receive an invitation to attend a ball and spend the night at a nobleman’s estate, La Vaubyessard. Charles had successfully treated the Marquis, who had developed an abscess in his mouth. Therefore, in appreciation of Charles’ work, the count sends him an invitation to his mansion.

At the aristocratic home of her host, Emma takes in the fine furnishings,
the candelabra, the rich fabrics, in short, everything she has ever dreamed of, and notes that "...even the castor sugar looked finer and whiter than elsewhere" (62). Although these fineries awe her, Emma takes great pains not to be thought of as merely a "country bumpkin". In preparation for the ball, Emma dresses "with [the] meticulous care of an actress making her debut" (62). Charles, in good spirits and proud of his lovely wife, attempts to kiss her shoulder, for she looks so beautiful, but Emma nervously snaps at him to leave her alone before he wrinkles her dress. Down in the ballroom, Emma at first merely gazes in rapture at the sophisticated partygoers. Soon, however, Emma is asked to dance, and she carries herself in such a manner that she attracts the attention of a dashing Viscount, who chooses her as his partner for a waltz.

[The men] had the complexion of wealth, that clear white skin which is accentuated by the pallor or porcelain, the shimmer of satin, the 'finish' on handsome furniture, and is maintained at its best by a modest diet of the most exquisite foods. Their necks moved freely in low cravats, their long side-whiskers rested upon turn-down collars, the handkerchiefs with which they wiped their lips were embroidered with large monograms and emitted a delicious scent. The older among them retained a youthful air, while the young ones revealed a certain maturity. Their nonchalant glances reflected the quietude of passions daily gratified; behind their gentleness of manner one
could detect that peculiar brutality inculcated by dominance in not over-exacting activities such as exercise strength and flatter vanity - the handling of thoroughbreds and the pursuit of wantons (Flaubert, 64).

Emma admires these men and their ladies noting their aristocratic qualities and elegance of manner. “She has such intelligence and taste that she adapts herself easily to the society of the aristocracy [here]...” (Tillet, 3). Indeed, Emma’s wit was apparent even to Charles’ first wife, who noted that Emma “had been brought up at Ursuline Convent and been what is called ‘well educated;’ in consequence of which she was expert at dancing, geography, drawing, fancy needlework and the piano” (Flaubert, 31). This education enhances her ability to become one of the group at the Viscount’s party. Emma has attention lavished upon her in the midst of a lifestyle she has always dreamed of for herself.

Awhirl in sensations of romance and luxury, Emma has the most wonderful night of her life. When the time comes for Emma and Charles to return home, Emma mopes about, dreaming of the dancing, the music, and of the dashing, slightly dangerous Viscount. “Her heart was like that. Contact with riches had left upon it a coating that would never wear off’ (69). The ball gives Emma memories to reminisce over and to dream about for years and only aggravates her
longing for a life better than her own. It is this fatal ball that “opens her eyes to her own deprivations and intolerably quicken[s] her desires” (James, 62). Hence, it increases Emma’s fervor to obtain a life she does not have.

After this experience of life among the wealthy and powerful, Emma begins to feel dowdy and inadequate by comparison to the fine ladies she has seen at the Viscount’s ball. Thus begins a cycle which eventually leads to her downfall: determined to enter the world of glamour and fashion, she buys guidebooks of Paris and subscribes to women’s fashion and society journals.

She started taking the women’s papers “Work-basket” and “Sylph of the Salon,” devouring in their entirety all the accounts of first-nights, race-meetings and parties, and becoming interested in a singer making her début or a shop that was being opened. She knew all the latest fashions, where to find the best tailors, the days for going to the Bois or the Opéra. She studied descriptions of furniture in Eugène Sue, and sought in Balzac and George Sand a vicarious gratification of her own desires. (Flaubert, 71)

These magazines inspire the same romantic notions in Emma that the romance novels had elicited in her as a child. “Emma, perpetually contrasting her actual surroundings with the ideal ones of her imagination, tries to introduce into her life some of the elegance of which she has read” (Tillet, 15). Although such elegance
may be beyond her means, she is determined to come as close to a luxurious lifestyle as possible:

She delighted [Charles] with a number of refinements. Now it would be a new way of making paper scones for the candles, now the altering of a flounce on her dress, or an extraordinary name for some quite ordinary dish which the maid had spoiled but which Charles devoured happily to the last mouthful. She saw some ladies in Rouen carrying bunches of trinkets on their watches; she bought some trinkets. She wanted a pair of big blue glass vases to go on the mantelpiece, and then, some while later, an ivory workbox with a silver-gilt thimble. The less Charles understood of these pretty things, the more they appealed to him. They were a further contribution to the pleasure of his senses and the comfort of his fireside, a kind of gold-dust sprinkled all along the narrow pathway of life. (Flaubert, 74)

Thus, Emma begins to purchase trinkets and mimics her lifestyle with her magazines. She studies the latest fashions and hairstyles and the latest trends in home decorating, duplicating these styles as far as her husband’s money and credit will allow. The guidebooks of Paris cause Emma to long for a world encrusted with gold, a world of duchesses to which she feels she belongs. “She dreams of mastering things she has no knowledge of because she’s heard -- or rather read -- about them” (Maraini, 75). This fast-paced life she yearns for in no way compares with the small town life she experiences daily.
In a rural environment where conformity and domesticity are regarded as ultimate feminine virtues, Emma’s intelligence and sensibility find no outlet for expression. Emma is “a young woman far superior in intelligence and sensibility to her acquaintances, ambitious, sighing for life in Paris, suffering from frustration [who has] unwisely married” (Tillet, 5). Several people in town remark that she is an intelligent woman. The chemist notes that “‘She’s a very clever woman, who wouldn’t be out of place as the wife of a subprefect’” (Flaubert, 120). Even “[the] housewives were won by her thrift, the patients by her courtesy, the poor by her charity” (120). Yet inwardly she knows that she does not belong in such a dreary life, and she yearns for the adventure to be found in a sophisticated city such as Paris. Indeed, the countryside “seemed a freak, a particular piece of bad luck that had seized on her, while beyond, as far as the eye could see, ranged the vast lands of passion and felicity” (Flaubert, 72). Emma’s escape into the world presented in the fashion papers serves only to create new vistas of greatness incomparable to the small town life she detests.

Over time, Emma’s frustration results in her becoming increasingly irritated and dissatisfied with Charles. His tendency toward plumpness, his slurping of his soup at the dinner table, his untidiness, and his stolid, complacent
ways enrage Emma.

Emma used sometimes to tuck the red border of his undervest inside his waistcoat, or straighten his caravet, or throw away a shabby pair of gloves he was about to put on. She did these things not, as he imagined, for his sake, but for her own, in an outburst of egoism, a nervous irritation. (Flaubert, 75)

Charles, on his part, does not suspect that his wife is unhappy or that she longs for things he is unable to give her. Since Emma believes that Charles lacks imagination and sensitivity, she cannot bring herself to confide in him. The lack of understanding between the two heightens Emma’s feelings of entrapment. In one instance, Charles tells Emma of an encounter in which a colleague had humiliated him at a patient’s bedside:

Emma got very angry with the man; Charles was touched, and kissed her on the forehead, a tear in his eye. She was mortified, she felt like hitting him. She ran into the passage, opened the window and took a breath of fresh air. (Flaubert, 75)

Not for the first time, Charles completely misreads Emma’s motives. Believing her to be indignant for his sake, Charles cannot imagine that Emma is, instead, furious with him and embarrassed for his shortcomings. Every incident of this sort is further proof to Emma that she will never experience the finer things in life,
never rise in society, never be allowed the sensations and luxuries she deserves. This episode further depicts the man’s dominance over a woman in this society. Charles, the weakling that he is, still demonstrates the way that a man belittles his wife. It is apparent that Emma’s opinion is not truly valued, for he simply kisses her when she voices her feelings, as a mother might treat a child. His lack of respect for her thoughts and his lack of understanding of her feelings cause Emma to sink deeper into depression.

As time progresses, Emma’s nervousness and agitation begin to take a toll on her health. She gives up playing the piano and quits sewing. When she becomes pale and experiences heart palpitations, Charles decides Emma’s problem is the environment of Tostes, their small town. Dutifully, Charles searches for and finds another district, Yonville l’ Abbaye, where they can live and he can work. As they pack, Emma pricks her finger on a wire from her wedding bouquet. Annoyed, she tosses it in the fire and watches it burn. The destruction of her wedding bouquet symbolizes Emma’s wish that she had never married (Tillet, 17) and foretells the major changes soon to occur in Emma’s life.

As the young couple leave Tostes in the spring, Emma discovers she is pregnant. Instantly, she longs for a son. Bearing a son would give her “a kind of
anticipatory revenge for all [of Emma’s] past helplessness” (Flaubert, 101). A man can travel, have adventures, and move about freely, both geographically and politically. Emma knows that “to be a woman is to be tied down, to find doors closed, to be condemned to more mediocre choices than those open to a man” (Llosa, 140-141). For a woman, Emma notes that “always there is a desire that impels and a convention that restrains” (Flaubert, 101).

Emma’s spiritual defiance of the typical “feminine” role, her desire to travel, to experience romantic love, and to be free from the chains of a conventional marriage express themselves in her desire for a son. When she gives birth to a girl instead, Emma faints.

Emma’s tragedy is that she is not free. She sees her slavery as not only a product of her social class -- the pithy bourgeoisie as immediatized by certain modes of life and prejudices -- and of her provincial milieu -- a tiny world where the possibilities of accomplishing anything of note are few -- but also, and perhaps most importantly, as a consequence of her being a woman.(Llosa, 140)

Now she has brought another female into the world to suffer the same fate.

Yonville, the Bovarys’ new home, soon begins to assume the same degree of tediousness for Emma as that which she faced in Tostes. Emma’s only
diversion lies in her conversations with Léon, a young man she meets upon their arrival. Léon, the son of a well to do family, is a sensitive, romantic lad with intellectual pretension. He is instantly attracted to the lovely, melancholy Emma.

The two young people share a passionate interest in music, opera, travel and literature. Together they look at the latest magazines and take strolls to visit Emma’s daughter at the wet nurse’s house, a practice of all but the poorest mothers of the time (Maraini, 36). Soon, Léon yearns “for an intimacy which he accounts [to be] well-nigh impossible” (Flaubert, 109).

More serious communications were, to be sure, passing between their eyes. As they tried to make conversation, they felt the same languor stealing over them both, as if their whispering voices were being drowned by the deep continuous murmur of their souls. Surprised by the strange sweetness of it, they never thought to describe or to explain what they felt. Coming delights, like tropical beaches, send out their native enchantment over the vast spaces that preceded them -- a perfumed breeze that lulls and drugs you out of all anxiety as to what may yet await you below the horizon. (Flaubert, 108)

However, Léon’s shyness and his reverence for Emma cause him to conceal his true feelings from Emma.

Although drawn to Léon, Emma at first resists the idea that she may be
falling in love with him. "Love, she believes, must come suddenly, with thunder and lightening, a hurricane from on high that swoops down into your life and turns it topsy-turvy, snatches away your will-power like a leaf, hurls your heart and soul into the abyss" (Flaubert, 113). Yet Léon comes far closer to Emma’s concept of an ideal man, a refined gentleman than Charles ever could. For example, she admires Léon’s fingernails, which are longer than those of most of the men in Yonville. Emma notes this in part because she takes such good care of her own, and in part because long nails represent aristocratic idleness, the utmost degree of bourgeois vanity and self-satisfaction (Maraini, 37). In addition, Léon shares Emma’s interests in everything romantic and everything aristocratic, creating a bond between the two which Emma only pretends to ignore.

The idyllic courtship phase of Emma and Léon’s affair is interrupted when he tells her he must leave Yonville for an apprenticeship in Rouen. The lovesick young man is annoyed when Emma, calmly working on her needlework, listens to his announcement with quiet resignation. To Léon, Emma appears uncaring about their impending separation.

But the more Emma became conscious of her love, the harder she strove to conceal and suppress it. She would have been glad if he had guessed; she envisaged various happenings and catastrophes
that might give him the hint. It was doubtless
indolence, or fear, that held her back. Modesty, too.
She wondered whether she had been too distant
with him -- and now the moment had gone by, and
all was lost! But her pride, her joy in saying
‘I am a virtuous woman,’ and in contemplating
her own attitudes of resignation in the mirror, brought
her some solace for the sacrifice she believed herself to
be making. (121)

In fact, however, Emma’s calm, accepting attitude masks her keen
disappointment.

...within, she was all desire and rage and hatred.
That straight-pleated dress hid a heart in turmoil,
those demure lips told nothing of its suffering.
She was in love with Léon; and she sought
solitude that she might revel in his image undisturbed.
It marred the pleasure of her daydreams to see him
in the flesh. The sound of his step set her trembling.
But in his presence her agitation subsided, leaving
nothing but an immense astonishment that worked
itself out in sadness. (Flaubert, 120).

Once again a man goes on to new adventures while the woman is left behind.

In the days that follow Léon’s absence, Emma seems to undergo a
transformation. Assuming the role of a virtuous wife and caring mother, she
seems bent on “cultivating a public persona that earns her the respect of society”
(Maraini, 45). She calls for her daughter, Berthe, to be sent home from the wet
nurse. “She was seen by her neighbors to take a new interest in her household, to
attend church regularly, and to be stricter with her maid” (Flaubert, 119). Emma sews new curtains, mends all of Charles’ clothes, and even has Charles’ slippers waiting by the fire when he comes home.

Secretly, however, Emma aches for the potential love that left with Léon. Within, “she was all desire and rage and hatred” (120). Her calm, domestic facade is a sham. Once again, Emma wallows in self-pity and melancholy. “[T]he appetites of the flesh, the craving for money, the melancholy of passion, all blended together in one general misery” (121). Emma mourns the loss of her “spiritual” companion, her one hope of romance, and harbors renewed resentment at poor, dull Charles for being so complacent in their life together, so unconscious of her turmoil.

Emma finally tries to solve her problems like any other “good Christian wife” would: she visits the local parish priest. The visit is doomed from the start. The priest is reprimanding a group of young choir boys and has no time to listen to Emma’s “mysterious” spiritual ailments. He answers her distractedly and complains about his own difficulties. Emma tries in vain to bare her soul to a priest who tosses her aside (Maraini, 46).

No one notices her despair, and Emma’s one attempt to seek counsel fails
miserably. Soon, the bleak days of suffering she experienced at Tostes begin again. Emma becomes pale, suffers “frequent attacks of faintness, and one day [spits] blood” (Flaubert, 138). Charles, afraid for his beloved wife’s well-being, pleads for his mother to come stay with them. This is a grave mistake. The elder Madame Bovary notes dryly that Emma only needs work to take her mind off herself, and insists that Emma quit reading books. Mother Bovary also cancels Emma’s subscription to a circulating library and denounces “the librarian as a poisoner” (Levin, 109). Ironically, the books Emma had read as a child had in fact shaped her into the bourgeois woman she was. However, her mother-in-law’s suggestion comes too late in life to have any lasting effect and only stirs up resentment between the two women. They quarrel, and the elder Madame Bovary leaves in a huff, while Charles looks on mournfully.

One day, a wealthy playboy, Rodolphe, brings a hired lad to Charles to be bled. Charles performs the task while Rodolphe eyes Emma appreciatively. He decides he must possess the pretty country woman and schemes for a chance to meet with Emma. Rodolphe shouts “‘Oh, I’ll have her!’” as he rides away with his companion (Flaubert, 143). He even states that he would “be bled if necessary” just to get Emma’s attention (144). His plan begins when they meet.
at a fair given in town. Immediately, Rodolphe initiates conversations on topics in which he finds Emma to be interested, and thus begins his scheme to obtain her. All the while, Emma pretends to be oblivious to his plan; she is enjoying the heady romance and passion of the courting process again, and this time her suitor is a handsome, sophisticated, fashionable man.

Rodolphe piques Emma’s interest when he steers the conversation toward “the dullness of the country, the lives that were smothered by it, [and] the illusions that perished there” (Flaubert, 151). Emma tells him he can leave all of the gloom behind. She offers the suggestion that, because he is a man, Rodolphe is free, and because he is rich, he has the means to go wherever he chooses. While Emma gazes at him, she recalls the Viscount, for “...his beard had exhaled that same perfume of lemon and vanilla” (139). Thus, Emma instantly associates Rodolphe with her perfect night of romance and dancing, placing Rodolphe in a promising position from the beginning.

Rodolphe senses her interest and begins to woo her with flattery. “Emma had never been told such things before, and her pride stretched out luxuriously in the warmth of his words, as though one were relaxing in a hot bath” (168). With only token resistance on Emma’s part, Rodolphe easily wins her over, and all that
remains is to arrange a rendezvous.

To further their plans, Rodolphe suggests to Charles that Emma’s health would benefit from riding lessons -- with Rodolphe, of course, as her teacher. Charles’ frank, open nature suspects nothing, and he consents enthusiastically. Thus, Emma and Rodolphe begin their affair amidst a setting of trees and forest meadows.

All of Emma’s passionate longings now find expression, as Rodolphe “assists [Emma]...to fulfill her sexual desires, [causing] fantasy and actuality to merge in [Emma’s]...realization; ‘I’ve a lover, a lover’” (Levin, 119). Emma now entirely feels herself to be a character, a heroine, in one of the romances she has read. She practices many of the conventions of courtly love of which she has read. For example, the lovers exchange miniatures and locks of hair. Emma even goes so far as to buy Rodolphe a signet ring and a riding whip with silver knob, heedless of the fact that these expensive love tokens place her and Charles further and further in debt. On his part, Rodolphe actually feels these gifts to be insignificant, inappropriate, and even a little embarrassing. He is still so infatuated with his pretty, enthusiastic mistress, however, that he accepts the gifts without comment.
Their relationship is similar to her romance novels also in the roles they play. “Emma masqueraded as a sexually submissive ‘femme évaporée’ to conceal from the world, and from herself, her active sexual strivings and intellectual ambitions, which in her world were the prerogatives of males” (Kaplan, 236). Appropriately, Emma plays the role of the weak compliant female while Rodolphe stars as the masculine hero.

During her relationship with Rodolphe an important event occurs. Homais comes to Emma with the idea of Charles operating on Hippolyte’s club foot. He explains that the operation would at once put an end to Hippolyte’s suffering and bring fame to the Bovarys. Homais hits a nerve when he speaks of fame and notoriety so she begins to badger Charles. Emma’s “one wish was for something more solid than love to lean upon” (Mariani, 27). Thus, she puts all of her efforts into trying to persuade Charles to perform the operation.

Eventually he gives in, and together with Homais performs the delicate operation. Disaster soon follows, for Hippolyte suffers from severe gangrene. Charles hides in their house to avoid the embarrassment of failure. Emma

...did not share his humiliation, she had her own
to bear: that of ever having expected ability from
such a man. As if she hadn’t perceived his mediocrity
quite clearly a score of times already!...She
remembered all her luxurious instincts, all the privations of her soul, the squalor of married life and housekeeping, her dreams dropping in the mud like wounded swallows, the things she had wanted and denied herself, the things she might have had! (Flaubert, 196, 197)

This only reinforces her desire to gain love through Rodolphe.

Time passes in this manner, until the affair begins to grow stale for both of them: “gone were those tender words that had moved her to tears, those tempestuous embraces that had sent her frantic” (Flaubert, 183). Their meetings become more predictable, their passions less intense. Emma and Rodolphe feel attachment to one another, but not love. Emma rereads all of the descriptions of love from her books yet cannot discover why she no longer feels the same. She longs for her lover to take her away, out of her conventional bourgeois environment. At first Rodolphe agrees. He is still enough under Emma’s spell that he wants to please her. Together, they plot their escape. However, Emma’s dream shatters when Rodolphe quietly leaves town and simply sends Emma a note in which he tells her that he loves her too much to run away with her and expose her to shame and ridicule. In a cowardly manner, he places the blame on fate for the outcome of their relationship. Emma is stunned. She is “a woman who has bet everything on a man” (Maraini, 74). She knows she cannot leave and follow
her desires to travel on her own; but she also knows that Rodolphe, being a man, can do so without any hesitations or repercussions. Emma relies on the fact that he is a man and has this ability to ensure her with happiness because he has the freedoms she does not have. Yet another avenue of escape has been closed to her, and she falls into a deep “brain fever.”

She lay with mouth hanging open, eyes closed, hands straight down at her sides, motionless, white as a waxen image. Two streams of tears welled out of her eyes and trickled slowly on to the pillow. (Flaubert, 219)

For forty three days, Charles patiently and tenderly nurses Emma back to health, bearing not only the stresses of her illness but also the stresses of having to borrow money. Eventually, Emma begins to climb back out of her apathetic stupor. Some days she is well enough to sit by the window to watch the street, yet on others she feels pains in her heart or chest or experiences bouts of vomiting. As time passes, Emma recovers and gives herself over once more to resignation and routine. She begins yet again to take care of her husband, her child, and her household. Now “her mother-in-law could find no fault with her, unless it was her mania for knitting vests for orphans instead of mending her own dusters” (227). At this time, their friend, Monsieur Homais, suggests they visit the theater in Paris.
Perhaps because she is afraid to expose herself once more to a life she can never have, Emma is at first reluctant to go. Charles finally persuades her, however, because he feels the excursion will do her good. The couple set off for Paris.

The Bovarys attend the Paris opera, and at once Emma feels transported back to the days of her youth. She studies the singers, putting herself in the heroine’s role, pretending the hero is singing to her, alone. “Drawn to the man by his creation of the character, she tried to picture to herself the life he led, that extraordinary, hectic, splendid life, that might have been hers if only chance had so ordained it” (237). Then the curtain falls, restoring reality. Charles leaves to get a glass of water at intermission and returns with news that he has just seen Léon.

Léon comes to Emma to pay his respects. As they begin to talk, suddenly, for Emma, the opera is merely background noise. Their discussions begin innocently: Emma’s illness, Léon’s business, and the welfare of all of his old acquaintances from Yonville. Soon, old feelings are rekindled between Léon and Emma.

Because of the late hour, they all say “adieu”, but not before Emma decides to stay in Paris for a couple of extra days — without Charles — to see the end of
the opera. This creates the perfect excuse to begin a relationship with Léon

At first, Emma hesitates to begin an affair with Léon. Since past experience has taught her that the preliminary stages of a love affair are sweeter than what follows, she plays the innocent. She protests to Léon that an affair would not be proper. He reminds her that they are in Paris, where everyone does it. "What could have convinced the little provincial, so falsely modest, if not the mythical image of the city that dictates the laws of behavior and fashion?" (Maraini, 80). After all, since Paris dictates the trends of the day, Emma would be going against the practices of fashionable society to deny him. Thus, Emma begins an affair with Léon, but she does so with an advantage. "Emma has learned a few lessons about submission and domination, and she does not hesitate to use them in...[this] love affair" (Kaplan, 232). She had placed herself in a submissive role with Rodolphe, and trusted him to lead her to a more desirable life. He has failed, and Emma learns to create her own happiness within the realms of an affair. This new sense of dominance appears when the two are together in their hotel room. There she asks Léon "'Child, do you love me?'" (Flaubert, 276). Emma is placing herself in the most dominating role a woman can attain, that of a mother.
As a woman, there are few times that Emma can express her dominance. Charles has laughed at her comments and deemed her feelings to be terms of endearment instead of valued opinions. The only position in which Emma is able to assert herself is as a mother. Berthe knows to mind her mother, just as Léon succumbs to her wishes now. Emma is a smart woman, who knows that she does not have the power of free thought like any man; thus, she takes advantage of the small role that allows her some advantage.

Soon, however, the excitement of the affair begins to dissipate. "She would look forward to a profound happiness at next meeting [Léon], then have to admit that she felt nothing remarkable" (293). This relationship proves to be as empty as her first. In both relationships, "Emma had rediscovered in adultery all the banality of marriage" (301). Once again, Emma’s affair only results in the same loneliness she experiences in her life with Charles.

At this point, Emma’s life begins to fall apart, as her debts, by now grown to huge proportions, begin to come due. Bill collectors appear at the Bovarys’ door to take their possessions from them. Emma refuses to tell Charles about the debt "to avoid placing herself in any position of inferiority to the man she lives with" (Maraini, 108). Instead, Emma desperately tries to win an extension for
payment, and she asks several relations for help.

The first person she asks for help is Léon, who does attempt to help by asking a friend, but gives up his assistance in Emma’s quest for assistance rather quickly. She then turns to the town lawyer Guillaumin, who acts surprised when she tells him her woes, but who secretly knows her dilemma and attempts to take advantage of it.

He put out his hand and took hers, covered it with a greedy kiss, then held it on his knee, daintily toying with her fingers while he whispered softly in her ear. (Flaubert, 314)

Emma balks at his suggestive overtones, as Guillaumin tells her that he loves her. She offers that she is “to be pitied ...[and]...not to be bought” (315). She leaves and heads for Binet, the tax collector’s house. As he works on his lathe, he listens to her problems. From outside his window the ladies of the town watch as Emma moves close to him and Binet turns red and moves away from her advances. Her attempt at seduction fails.

Unwilling to go home, she turns and heads to Rodolphe’s farm. Finding him at home and in a nostalgic mood, Emma claims that she has never stopped loving him. He tells her he cannot give her the money she needs, causing her to lash out:
I'd have given you everything, sold everything
I had, worked with my hands, begged in the streets,
just for a smile, for a glance, just to hear you say
'Thank you.' And you sit there quite calmly in
your easy-chair, as if you hadn't made me suffer
enough already! ...And now when I come back to him,
him with his money, his happiness, his freedom, to
beg help that any casual stranger might give – entreating
him, bringing back to him all my love – he turns me away
because it'd cost him a hundred and twenty
pounds! (323)

Thus, she runs away from him until she reaches town, madness beginning to take
hold of her.

Nothing can save Emma from impending doom. Like a heroine in one of
her romance novels, Emma desperately decides to poison herself. She bolsters this
decision with the rationalization that Charles and her daughter will be better off
without her. She reflects that she can never be truly happy. Throughout her life
she has been incapable of love and "always pursue[s] a false image of love,”
resulting in her unhappiness (Tillet, 7). In spite of her efforts to live a life of
romantic ideals, Emma sees that she falls short of greatness in some way (13).
Thus, her resolution is to abandon herself to her misery by taking her own life.

Emma is greatly surprised, however, when she begins to suffer shortly after
ingesting the arsenic. [For]..."even the great dramatic exit from life is bungled and
turns into a sordid, lengthy, physical agony” (21). Emma thinks to herself, “‘There’s not much in dying,’ ..’I shall go to sleep, and it will all be over’” (Flaubert, 327). Her romantic concept of a noble painless death is as flawed as all of her other romantic ideas about life (Maraini, 113). Over the course of several days, Emma vomits, convulses and moans in extreme agony while her husband and neighbors watch helplessly. Charles, aghast, listened as:

She began to scream horribly. She damned and cursed the poison, begged it to be quick, and with her stiffening arms pushed away everything that Charles, in a still worse agony than she, kept trying to make her drink. (Flaubert, 330)

After suffering yet more indignity at the hands of male medical and religious practitioners, Emma exits her life with an ironic smile, as if she realizes that, despite all of her efforts, she has never reached the romantic plateau she strove for.

Emma’s search for meaning outside the confines of domestic life constitutes her as a reasonable woman. In fact, Flaubert’s portrayal of her is a negative portrait of the condition and socialization of the modern woman (Berg, 29). Although she is aware that she lived in a man’s world, she often flaunts tradition. Charles notes in one of his first visits to Les Bertaux, the farm that Emma lives on with her father, that Emma carries “a pair of tortoise-shell eye
glasses attached, in masculine fashion, to two buttonholes of her bodice” (Flaubert, 29). When riding with Rodolphe, she would wear a man’s hat, and on one occasion, she surprises the townspeople by appearing in a vest and britches, the man’s riding attire of the day. Later, during her affair with Léon in Paris, she attends a masquerade ball dressed like a man “in order to fully enjoy the ball” (Maraini, 101). Although Emma desires the same freedoms a man possesses, she represents “someone who desires power but lacks the means to obtain it” (101). Accordingly, wearing men’s clothing allows her a little taste of the emancipation a man knows so well.

The men in Emma’s life treat her in a patronizing manner, in part, because of her beautiful appearance. “Her father and Charles Bovary both see the girl as a flower too delicate (that alabaster skin, those tender hands, those tiny Parisian feet, those beautifully adorned blue dresses) to be left to languish on a farm” (7). When Rodolphe seduces her, he does so because she embodies more beauty than his present lover. Later, at the opera, Léon is seized with emotion as he looks at her in her stunning blue dress. Consequently, it is her appearance that draws men to her in an attempt to lavish her with their false sense of love.

Ultimately, however, it is not only her gender that most determines the
demeaning and confining role Emma is forced to play:

The society's oppressiveness, all the bourgeois order of things, is stated by Flaubert through the oppression of this woman; since 'the woman' is a prime ideological investment of that order, of its truth, and since women as such are then exactly marginal by virtue of their emblematic centrality, their non-existence other than in the Humaisian [sic] discourse of angels and whores, mothers and hysterics. (Heath, 141).

Emma lacks the wealth and social station to make her situation bearable. She exists in a petty, bourgeois world where there is little scope for feminine creativity.

In conclusion, Emma’s life has been a tragic search for love and happiness. Yet she never seems happy except when she is lost in her daydreams or in the midst of one of her romantic novels. Only in her mind can she experience the freedom she longs for, whether it be traveling to Paris and other exotic places, or running for a political office. Because she is a woman, she is deemed by society to be intellectually inferior. Because she is a woman and follows the trends of reading romantic novels, she develops a gilded view of the world. Her eventual demise is the one single event in her life over which she has had control. Emma’s refusal to survive lies in her refusal to confine herself to a colorless existence.
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