

Reality Versus Illusion:
A Structural Analysis of Madame Bovary

Despite the countless articles that have been written on Flaubert's Madame Bovary, it is nevertheless one of those masterpieces that still continue to draw the attention of many critics. This immense quantity of criticism may lead critics to believe that nothing else can be done except trace the role of elements such as "windows," "dust," or "shoes;" but recently developed theories also provide new ways of approaching the novel. Even though these new methods may not change the general opinion of the novel's essence, they can allow the reader to focus directly on the work's composition and thus be able to appreciate more fully its artistic qualities.

Madame Bovary is the story of a married woman torn between the demands society imposes on all individuals and her own emotional needs. To examine how these opposing forces are played against each other for the purpose of creating an artistic piece of literature, we must take into consideration both the story line and the opposing elements that make up the novel. In linguistic terms, the plot of any traditional novel occurs in a horizontal line called either the syntagmatic or the diachronic axis because of its linear development. The vertical line, called the paradigmatic or synchronic axis, contains individual events which take place only at given points and are at times interchangeable with each other. The theory that Floyd Merrell explicates in his article "Toward a New Model of Narrative Structure,"¹ and which John S. Brushwood applies and interprets in "Narrative Illusion of Paradox Resolved: Alberto Blest Gana's Martin Rivas,"² allows us to place Madame Bovary in a structural schema that will

emphasize the union of the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic lines. The system of analysis used by Merrell and Brushwood is composed of three levels, 1) the axiological, 2) the symbolico-semantic, and 3) the praxemic.

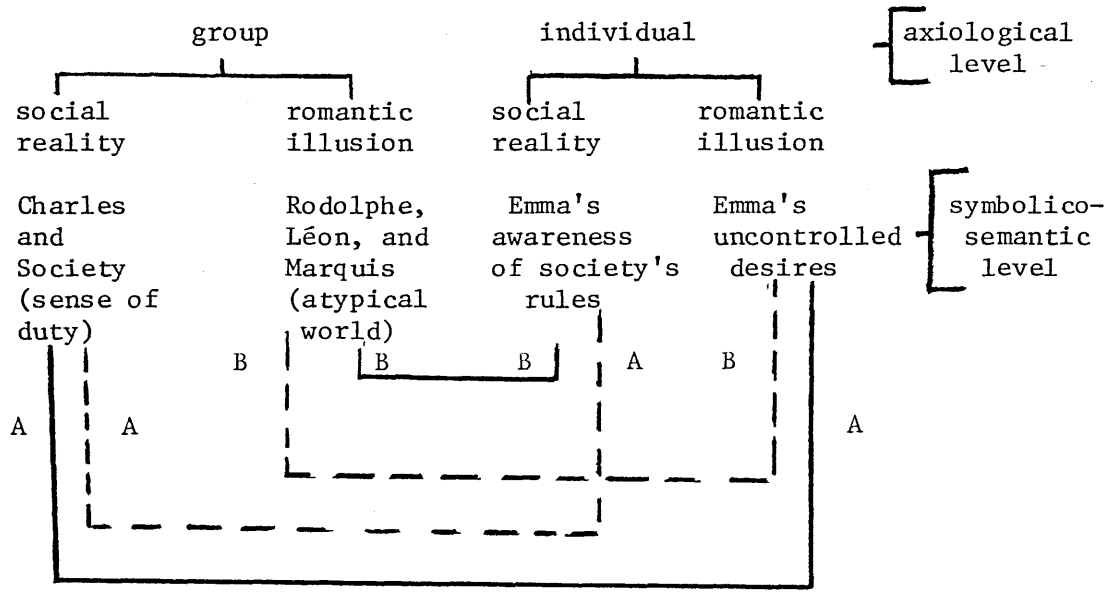
The axiological level occurs in the paradigmatic line of any text and consists of a fundamental opposition such as life versus death, individual versus group, freedom versus necessity, etc.; while the symbolico-semantic level refers to the specific text under analysis. In the praxemic level, otherwise known as the action level, the duality between paradigm and syntagma disappears momentarily to achieve a reconciliation between the two lines. The element that makes this union possible is called a "mediating agent."

In Madame Bovary, Emma is caught between reality and illusion. There are several things she wishes were different. One thing she desires throughout her life is to live in town, as opposed to living in the country. She expresses this wish even before she marries Charles: "Elle eut bien voulu, ne fut-ce au moins que pendant l'hiver, habiter la ville..."³ Once married she expresses a desire to lead either a life of luxury and pleasure or else of religious retreat: "Elle avait envie de faire ces voyages ou de retourner vivre à son couvent. Elle souhaitait à la fois mourir et habiter Paris" (p. 94). While Paris represents grandeur, luxury, and the unknown, the convent is the place where through mostly Romantic literature she was able to live--by using her imagination--the life of her dreams. In the intimacy of her marriage she wonders why, if she did not marry "un de ces hommes d'ardeurs taciturnes qui travaillent la nuit dans des livres," at least this name "Bovary" was not "illustre, le voir étalé chez des libraires, répété dans les journaux, connu par toute la France" (p. 95). Her unwillingness to accept her situation is the main, though not the only, cause of her inner turmoil. Society, with all

its traditional expectations, is the other element that creates a conflict within her. The fact that she belongs to the world of the nineteenth century leaves her few choices as to what she can do with her life. During this period there were basically only three institutions from which a woman could choose: the convent, marriage, or prostitution. Having chosen marriage, she yearns for her days of youth at the convent. Prostitution fails to enter her mind, perhaps because it does not exist in the realm of her bourgeois upbringing, although she does consider the possibility of adultery:

La médiocrité domestique la poussait à des fantaisies luxueuses, la tendresse matrimoniale en des désirs adultères. (p. 141)

The fundamental opposition that results from these events is the contrast between group versus individual. The following diagram shows how this axiological opposition functions within the structure of the novel:



The axiological component group versus individual "constitutes an abstract representation of the fundamental 'existential' antinomies of human thought common to all peoples in all societies; and therein lies its universal nature."⁴ Thus, to figure out what makes this novel a specific and unique case within its universal realm, we must proceed to the symbolico-semantic level where we deal directly with the text itself. In this novel both Emma and different members of a collective group must confront illusion and reality. Solid line A marks a distinct contrast between Emma's illusions and society's expectations, making her desires seem outrageous in a world where conformity predominates. Solid line B also contrasts illusion and reality. In a conversation between Emma and Rodolphe, before they become sexually involved, Emma shows her awareness of society's rules when she says, "Mais il faut bien suivre un peu l'opinion du monde et obéir à sa morale" (p. 174). Her capacity to repress her feelings toward Léon while he is living in Yonville is also a sign that for a long time she is able to respect or abide by society's rules. Broken line A shows the connection there exists between Emma's world and Charles'. It is a reality she cannot escape. Broken line B connects Emma's individual world with that one outside where her illusions can be lived. In her love affair with Rodolphe, she is able to escape the the routine of her household without ever having to leave town. Léon provides an opportunity to leave both, and the Marquis d'Andervilliers' invitation to his "château" allows her to enjoy for a couple of days the world of the aristocracy and all its grandeur.

Now that we have seen how the axiological and the symbolico-semantic levels are operating within the novel's structure, we can examine the praxemic level. According to Merrell's theory, this is where the synchronic and the diachronic axes join and a

reconciliation between the binary oppositions becomes possible. But before this can take place, the intervention of a "mediating agent" is necessary.

Everything that occurs in the praxemic level comes from the linguistic differentiation that Roman Jakobson makes between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor is association by selection, and one sign may be substituted for another. This line is vertical and is considered the paradigmatic, synchronic dimension. Metonymy is association by contiguity, where one sign is associated with another because one follows the other in a sequence. Unlike metaphoric signs, these cannot be substituted for each other. The metonymic line is the horizontal axis and it is syntagmatic and diachronic.⁵ The difference between Jakobson's model and Merrell's is that in the former's, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic lines are irreconcilable; while in the latter's, they join momentarily in the praxemic level through mediating agents.

In Madame Bovary there are other binary oppositions that are metaphors of the axiological opposition group versus individual. They are:

- 1) conformism versus rebellion
- 2) realism versus idealism

Both Charles and his mother are perfect examples of conformists. Through the use of free indirect style Flaubert portrays Charles' abulia: "Mais Charles n'avait point d'ambition! Un médecin d'Ivetot, ..., l'avait humilié quelque peu, au lit même du malade, devant les parents assemblés" (p. 95). While Charles recalls this anecdote nonchalantly, Emma is angered by it and feels the urge to strike her husband for being so indifferent. As far as Mme Bovary senior is concerned, just because she has led such a hard life--witnessing her husband spend her money, having to put up with his nights out with women and getting drunk, looking after business matters, plus having to take care of all the household duties--she expects Emma to do the same.

She suggests to Charles:

Sais-tu ce qu'il faudrait à ta femme? Ce seraient des occupations forcées, des ouvrages manuels! Si elle était, comme tant d'autres, contrainte à gagner son pain, elle n'aurait pas ces vapeurs-là, qui lui viennent d'un tas d'idées qu'elle se fourre dans la tête, et du désœuvrement où elle vit. (pp. 157-158)

Contrary to Mme Bovary senior and Charles, Emma refuses to conform to such mediocre styles of life. For one, she rebels against traditional or common beliefs. Just for the sake of being contradictory,

elle se mettait quelquefois à exprimer des opinions singulières, blamant ce que l'on approuvait, et approuvant des choses perverses ou immorales: ce qui faisait ouvrir de grands yeux à son mari. (p. 100)

Other forms of rebellion include letting her house take care of itself, disregarding her personal appearance, and buying things she cannot afford.

Concerning the opposition realism versus idealism, it seems that everyone can accept his or her condition except Emma. There is no one character that can be directly opposed to Emma, but her own extravagant desires set her apart from the rest of society. Emma's ideal world consists of taking long trips, having an illustrious name, buying everything she desires, and getting involved in love affairs.

As the story is about Emma, she can be placed both in the paradigmatic axis--and be a part of the aforementioned metaphorical oppositions--as well as in the syntagmatic axis. Her actions, which are associated to one another by contiguity, and

her role as protagonist, allow the novel to move chronologically along the syntagmatic line. The accumulated events in her life, starting with her many inner conflicts--"les appétits de la chair, les convoitises d'argent et les mélancolies de la passion . . ." (p. 140)--; her constant and uncontrolled spending; and her two love affairs finally lead us to the end of her story, which is at the same time the end of her life.

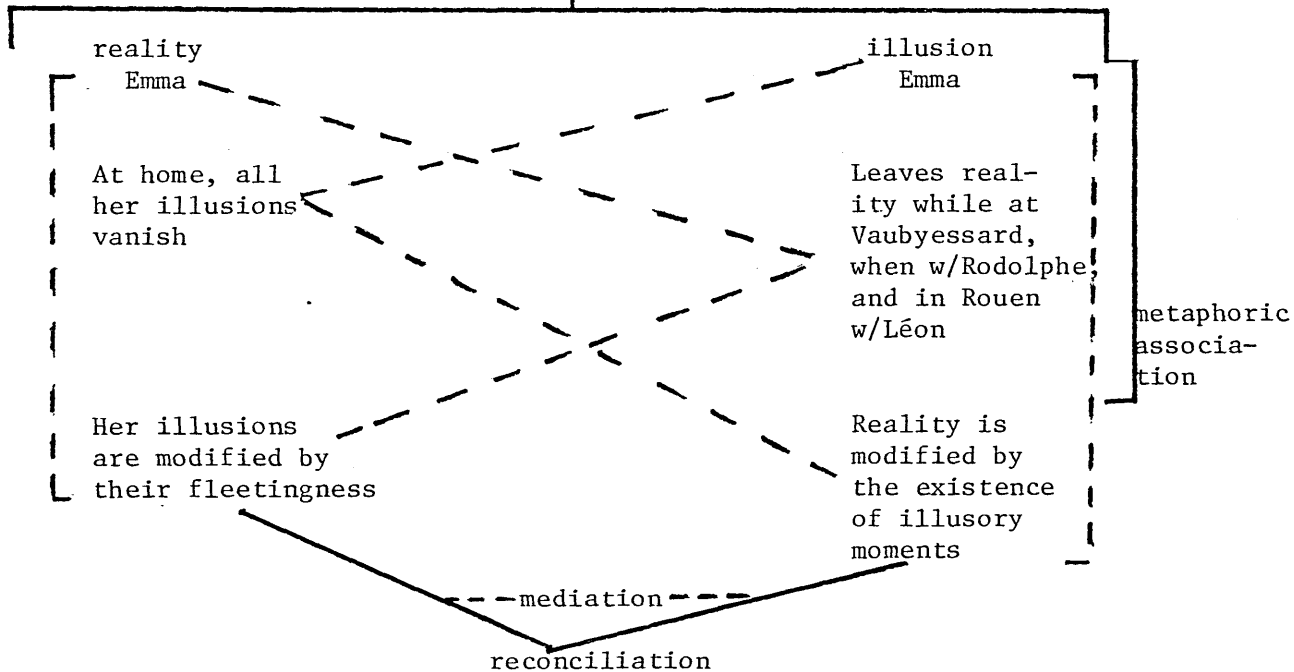
Having seen the manner in which the components of the synchronic and diachronic lines work individually, we can now proceed to examine how the praxemic level allows them to come together through a mediating agent, causing a reconciliation between the two. In Madame Bovary death is the mediating agent. Even though some of Emma's conflicts stem from the fact that she lives in a closed, provincial society that does not understand women with such anxieties, it is also true that most of her problems are within herself. Although the popular belief among critics is that she is a product of her provincial surroundings, the way in which Flaubert portrays her character refutes this idea:

Emma devenait difficile, capricieuse. Elle se commandait des plats pour elle, n'y touchait point, un jour ne buvait que du lait pur, et, le lendemain, des tasses de thé à la douzaine. Souvent, elle s'obstinait à ne pas sortir, puis elle suffoquait, ouvrait les fenêtres, s'habillait en robe légère. Lorsqu'elle avait bien rudoyé sa servante, elle lui faisait des cadeaux ou l'envoyait se promener chez les voisines, ... (p. 99)

Such conflicts in a person are not exclusive to someone living in a small town; people in a big city can suffer them as well. When attempting to understand, classify, or explain Emma, one must

delve more into the development of her character and not merely be content to examine her surroundings. The nonconformist aspects of her character that Flaubert presents prove that even if she lived in an entirely different situation, she would still be dissatisfied. This being the case, what we find in the praxemic level is not the opposition group versus the individual, but Emma versus herself in a world where reality is opposed to illusion:

metonymic association



Since the kind of life Emma wants to lead represents a threat to the order society has established, her existence in such a world is impossible. Despite the fact that all she finds at home is an unpleasant man who snores, has no ambition, and has all the following bad habits:

Il prenait, avec l'âge, des allures épaisses; il coupait, au dessert, le bouchon des bouteilles vides; il se passait, après manger, la langue sur les dents; il faisait, en avalant sa soupe, un gloussement à chaque gorgée, et, comment il commençait d'engraisser, ses yeux, déjà petits, semblaient remonter vers les tempes par la bouffissure de ses pommettes. (p. 95)

she is unable to leave him and their "ugly" child because she lacks the means. Her only way out is through a man, but neither Rodolphe nor Léon is willing to play the role of the Romantic hero and rescue her. Before she meets either of her two lovers, she has already experienced momentarily the combination of illusion and reality. The first time she penetrates a world that had only existed in her dreams is when she and Charles visit the Vaubyessard castle invited by the Marquis d'Ander-villiers. There she makes new discoveries; she meets dukes and counts, and tastes pineapple for the first time. For weeks thereafter she tries to relive the memory of the ball, but eventually it fades away. In her love affair with Rodolphe she is able to combine the reality of her home life with the illusion of a forbidden love. Her mistake is to believe that a man like Rodolphe wants her forever and that their love affair can become an ideal marriage. Her relationship with Léon is partly encumbered by her economic problems, and her failure to handle either of them tactfully leads her to

despair and finally to commit suicide. Because society is unable to accommodate both crude reality and fantastic illusion within its norms, this opposition can find reconciliation only in death. The fact that the last line of the novel mentions Homais' mediocre accomplishments reinforces the idea that Emma did not belong in a society where vulgarity prevailed. Homais' worldly need for power and glory--manifested in his desire to be the only man of medicine in Yonville and to be awarded the cross of the Legion of Honor--is a sharp contrast with Emma's more ethereal and illusory aspirations.

Thus, what the axiological, the symbolico-semantic, and the praxemic levels have allowed us to do is see how the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic lines function and the way in which they are united by a mediating agent in order to create the totality of any given work. In the case of Madame Bovary, through the universal binary opposition group versus individual, we were able to delve into the novel and examine its inner workings. Reducing a work to its binary opposition is equivalent to reducing a set of fractions to their lowest common denominator. The act of synthesizing a work of literature or a mathematical equation to its most basic component makes it easier to find a point of departure that will lead us to the revelation of its totality. And it is precisely in the praxemic level--where the two opposing elements come together--that we are able to see the novel in its structural totality. An finally death, as the mediating agent, shows us the romantic qualities of a protagonist who is unable to live in a realistic world, and who must therefore transcend life in order to fulfill her dreams.

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NOTES

¹ Floyd Merrell, "Toward a New Model of Narrative Structure," in The Analysis of Hispanic Texts: Current Trends in Methodology, Editors, Mary Ann Beck, et al., pp. 150-169.

² John S. Brushwood, "Narrative Illusion of Paradox Resolved: Alberto Blest Gana's Martin Rivas," in Genteel Barbarism (USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

³ Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 56. Other references to the novel will appear within the text in parentheses.

⁴ Merrell, p. 154.

⁵ Brushwood, p. 68.

