The Structure of "Madame Bovary"
Author(s): Keith Rinehart
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by Keith Rinehart

FOR THOSE WHO LIKE to discover the secrets of novelists, the most attractive feature of Madame Bovary may be that in this novel Flaubert has managed to express, impersonally, so much of himself. Lubbock has noticed the skill with which Flaubert handles point of view, allowing the inward feelings of the characters to blossom without sentimentality and presenting the exterior impressions without cynicism. Toward the title character, Emma Bovary, he seems most sympathetic even when he is most disgusted. When Flaubert announces, as he does in a published letter, that he is Madame Bovary, the psychological or autobiographical interest in the novel is heightened: the sympathy and self-disgust unfold themselves in the novel without special pleading. There are no concealed excuses. The well-known mot juste embodies the right feelings, the true observation; and Flaubert, though objective, is never disinterested—hence the psychological tension.

But neither the skillful treatment of perspective nor the autobiographical content is the chief merit of Madame Bovary. The psychological tension is there, expanded like a rainbow around its hidden center, but the novel’s beauty—which is apparently so simple, like the rainbow’s—is the product of a structure not evident to the casual eye at all. The “center” has very little to do with the structure, and if all we knew of Flaubert were Madame Bovary, the novel would still stand as a classic. The secret lies in the art of its construction.

Why is the title character not introduced in the first chapter? Why is the reader given a rapid review of Charles’ life and introduced to two other Madame Bovarys—Charles’ mother and the first wife—before meeting Emma Bovary and beginning the action of the novel? The structural significance of the first chapter is to explain Charles’ early life, chiefly the influence of women in his life, an influence that does so much to explain his subsequent relationship with Emma. The first chapter is the first part of a “framing device” within which the action of the novel—Emma Bovary’s action—is contained, but the “framing” nature of the first chapter is seen only in retrospect from the last chapter of the novel. By itself, the first chapter may seem to be a weak opening, having a mild interest of its own but nothing of the strength that a plunge into the main action would have. The use of a “complete frame” is unusual in novels, even those employing
what may be called a “framing device”: Jane Austen, for instance, though meticulous in wrapping up her story in the final chapter, usually begins her novels with immediate action. Structurally, the difference is that Charles serves as a “platform” for the action; none of Jane Austen’s heroes or heroines has this function.

In the use of this device Flaubert exercises the same care that has been so often noted in his choice of words. The first chapter runs quickly, though not breathlessly, over the significant features of Charles’ life before Emma. It is closely packed; scenes and concrete details are judiciously interspersed with paragraphs of exposition—his youth, his studies, his first marriage and after practice as a physician. His character is firmly established by the end of the first chapter. Emma is not introduced until the second chapter. The first chapter of the novel is eleven pages long; the last chapter is also eleven pages long. Although Emma dies two chapters before, she is not buried until the next to the last chapter. The last chapter runs at about the same speed and is as compact as the first. Before Emma, after Emma: Charles is shown in prospect and retrospect, a secure foundation for the main action and its significance.

This extraordinary use of the framing device as “platform” gives the first clue to the structure of Madame Bovary. So careful of even physical symmetry—the number of pages used for both the opening and the concluding chapters is identical—Flaubert shows the nature of his craftsmanship, indicates that the structure of this novel may be seen even in its physical proportions—so many pages to this, so many chapters to that, until it seems that the physical symmetry is intentional and that physical structure is correlated with literary structure. The three-part physical structure suggests the triangle or pyramid, the key to the literary structure of the narrative.

The three parts of Madame Bovary are separated from each other by a change in scene. Part I gets the novel under way and shows the early married life of Charles and Emma in Tostes. Part II gives the middle years of their marriage in Yonville-L’Abbaye. Part III, the final years of the marriage, shows Emma mainly in Rouen, though she resides with Charles at Yonville and both end their lives there. In each case the change of scene results from her illness—slight and capricious in the change from Tostes to Yonville, more serious and deep-rooted in the change from Yonville to Rouen. These moves make one uneasy, convey in terms of geographical distance as well as literary structure—in the shift from part to part—the unrest that Emma feels. The first move temporarily arouses hope: maybe Emma will find a more satisfactory life in Yonville. The second suggests desperation: Emma can only come to grief in Rouen—but she may yet exemplify the romantic dictum, “The world well lost for love.” The im-
pending tragedy might find its classic dénouement in romance triumphant over the petty bourgeois world, though that world will exact its impotent revenge on the bodies of the lovers. However, if Emma seems heroic at this point, the illusion does not last. For neither by changing places, nor by soaring into romance nor by fluttering in the grasp of sordid intrigue can Emma escape.

The main action of the novel is a flight from the commonplaces of life into a world that never was. Made ready by reading novels (a fact which has its own ironic humor) and the stirrings of her own nature, Emma is liberated from the farm, the peasantry, and her father’s house by Charles’ offer. She sees before her an escape from the coarseness of the country folk and, not so clearly, the rosy mists of love in a more refined sphere. She drifts toward her honeymoon expecting that delight, that devotion of which the poets have written—and finds the first Madame Bovary’s withered bridal bouquet. She feels the lyric impulse within her, but she meets no corresponding rapture to catch her up into the seventh heaven of true lovers. Charles has no such rapture, no comprehension of it, no awareness that it is required or that it exists. His delight is—for Emma—domestic, commonplace, dense. As a result, Emma turns to the society of Tostes to see what she can make of it.

The first attempt sees her flying high: an invitation to the chateau, extended by its noble host and providing entree into noble society, sets a kind of standard throughout the novel. Emma drags Charles along with her, painfully aware of his social deficiencies. Flaubert shows Charles’ physical discomfort: the pants too tight across the belly; the trouser straps awkward for dancing; the five hours bolt upright watching whist; and the relief when Charles pulls his boots off and releases his feet. Emma, however, waltzes for the first time, so beautifully that all notice it. Her partner, a viscount, inspires in her the first stirrings of that rapture which she has been looking for. The ball at the chateau completely unsettles her for her daily life; she returns home to dismiss the old servant for “impertinence,” to neglect her house, to coddle herself with little luxuries, and to moon about the viscount, now in Paris. “She wished at the same time to die and to live in Paris.”

The ball, with its lingering memories of the viscount, is the most important event in Part I. It has its parallel elsewhere—at the end of Part II and in Part III, the theatre party in Rouen and the subsequent love affair with Leon. But Part II shows more clearly the parallelism of structure; Part II is a pyramid within the larger pyramid of the novel. In her flight from the commonplace, Emma in Yonville meets the chief bourgeoisie of the village. This first encounter, Chapter I, Part II, holds little promise for her, but in Chapter II she meets a young man, Leon Dupuis, who seems like
herself to be romantic. He reads poetry, he likes “German” music, and he is given to lonely walks through the countryside. The acquaintance ripens into a sentimental friendship. He is not the viscount, but he is the most congenial soul available. Unmarried, hardly more than a youth, Leon makes Emma feel more experienced, older. Perhaps she feels that there is little danger of his getting out of hand; he is a safe partner in her romantic excursions. However, she is not calculating; she is impulsive, and her impulse leads her to spend much of her time with Leon. But, although some of the neighbors suspect that he is her lover, the truth is that both are too inexperienced to begin a love affair. He sighs; she remains passive—and there the friendship remains until he has to leave Yonville to take up his studies in Paris.

This tender friendship is more serious than the chance acquaintance with the viscount. There are many more opportunities for a clandestine affair: Emma met the viscount only in Charles’ presence, but with Leon she is frequently alone. Neither Emma nor Leon lacks the will to love one another; neither is restrained by anything so conventional as puritan principles; they simply lack the skill to begin an affair. Yet one still feels sympathy for Emma. She realizes her danger, though she is not entirely clear about what it is. In Chapter VI she rushes to the priest only to find that he is a clerical bourgeois without even the time, in the bustle of his numerous duties, to hear her. The impulse to consult the priest passes by, and she returns home in a state worse than before. The second main structural episode is finished.

Part II is divided into fifteen chapters. Leon has left for Paris by the end of Chapter VI. Chapter VII introduces a new man, older, experienced, cynical—one of the local gentry—Rodolphe Boulanger, who sees that Emma is ripe for plucking. The pyramidal structure of Part II reaches its apex in Chapter VIII, the middle chapter. Structurally, it is the most interesting chapter in the novel. In it the several themes of the novel are brilliantly displayed through the shuttling sights and speeches of the provincial agricultural show which Emma attends with Boulanger. Their conversation stands out against the bourgeois background of the fair and provides narrative continuity, romance standing apart from the heavy routine speeches, the stolid actions of this bourgeois festival.

There are new notes as well. The absent Louis-Philippe, “to whom no branch of public or private prosperity is a matter of indifference,” enlarges the bourgeois aura and epitomizes it. Balancing him, the novelist portrays a wholly admirable character, neither romantic nor bourgeois, who serves within the structure as a moral standard. She is the measure of both Emma and the society in which Emma finds herself. “Catherine Nicaise Elizabeth Leroux, of Sassetot-la-Guerrière, for fifty-four years of service on the same
farm, a silver medal—value, twenty-five francs!” Amid remarks about her stupidity, her awkwardness as the unaccustomed center of attention, the old peasant woman accepts the medal. “Thus stood before these radiant bourgeois this half-century of servitude.”

This is the moral apex of the novel. From here on, Emma Bovary goes downhill. Within six pages, at the beginning of Chapter IX, Boulanger seduces her. At last she has achieved the great romantic passion of the poets, she thinks, but it is sensual and tawdry. Against her intensity are balanced his cynicism and short-term calculations.

The next structural event in Part II is Emma’s attempt to urge Charles to professional eminence. This springs from motives more false than those earlier in Part II that led her to seek spiritual advice, in Chapter VI. That was impelled by the desire to change herself; this, by the desire to change Charles so that she will not detest him. It starts at the end of Chapter X; the appalling result ends Chapter XI. The bungling operation on Hippolyte’s club foot terminates in gangrene and amputation—a symbol of Emma’s resultant attitude toward Charles and her marriage.

The pyramidal structure of *Madame Bovary* becomes increasingly evident as Part II continues. Emma’s preparation for elopement with Boulanger recalls her increasing restlessness in Tostes at the end of Part I; her malaise there is balanced by her genuine illness here as Boulanger leaves without her. Charles once again does everything he can to restore her to health. He cannot leave Yonville himself, but he enables her to do so as much as lies within his power. The growing separation between them that began at the chateau in Part I, where she danced so successfully and he not at all, that was magnified by the innocent flirtation with Leon and the guilty affair with Boulanger, has become a matter of physical distance now. For Emma’s interest in life is now centered in Rouen, while Charles remains behind in Yonville.

Part III shows a degraded Emma, playing a curiously masculine role as her desires become less “romantic” and more aggressively physical. Leon re-enters her life at the Rouen theater; the subsequent liaison is reminiscent of the Boulanger affair, but this time Emma is Boulanger, less cynical yet resourceful and insatiable, and Leon is a more prudent, pallid Emma: “He was rather becoming her mistress than she his.” His romantic temper weakens as he grows toward his profession, “Every notary bears within him the débris of a poet.” Emma ultimately finds him “incapable of heroism, weak, banal, more spiritless than a woman, avaricious too, and cowardly.” Yet the affair has become a necessity for her, a narcotic, a desperate refuge, and it is he who finally ends it, leaving her to face the consequences of her recklessness.

Emma’s ruin is not that of the romantic heroine who, having lost honor,
MADAME BOVARY

has lost all. She has lost something far more important—money: hers, Charles', their inheritances, their future income, the very furniture in their home. There follows a tempestuous time in Yonville—a visit to the shark Lheureux, to Monsieur Guillaumin, the notary, a secret moneylender, who offers "love" as the price of his interest, and to Boulanger, now back at his estate. She asks Boulanger for love and for three thousand francs, which he refuses. The tale of her romances with men is complete: the charming episode with the viscount, whom she thinks she has caught sight of a few pages earlier, is balanced by the frantic promiscuity of her last days.

The last episode represents a return almost to the base of the pyramidal structure. There remains but one more episode—her suicide, which parallels her marriage. There is the preparation for both, the anticipations of the one over against the paroxysms of the other, the ceremony by which she entered into the main business of the novel and that by which she leaves it. Perhaps the structure may be seen most clearly in diagram:

(Louis-Philippe) — (Catherine Leroux)
The agricultural fair; the Boulanger seduction

Leon innocent— — —Leon guilty

The viscount— — — — — — — — — — — Frantic attempts to borrow money:
Lheureux, Guillaumin,
Boulanger

marriage— — — — — — — — — — — suicide and funeral

— — — — — — — — — — — Charles— — — — — — — — — —

The diagram, however, is not to be confused with a plot chart. If this were the whole story, the novel would be far less wonderful than it is. It would be a trite morality on an ever-recurrent theme: "The wages of sin is death." The pyramid may be an enduring monument, but it is also a fairly stodgy one. Emma climbs no laborious steps up one surface to slide to disaster down the other. Her movement is quite different. As she sees herself, she soars in perpetual quest for genuine romance. But the vision of her is double; seen with the crabbed eyes of her bourgeois relatives and neighbors, she pursues a steadily downward course—her profitless flights from Tostes and Yonville, her loathing of her bourgeois surroundings, her disregard for her husband and child, the climax of her egoism in suicide. From this view, bourgeois morality is thoroughly vindicated: she is a "bad lot," the end of her career might have been prognosticated in its early beginnings.
But there is one more element in the structure that completes the picture and shows the entire edifice in a new light. Emma dies at the end of Chapter VIII, Part III. In Chapters IX and X and in Chapter XI, the last chapter of the novel, Charles emerges with the final irony: the great love which Emma had sought was at home, in her husband's heart. As a romanticist she had been unable to see or to value it, even though Charles' love is not the bourgeois affection founded on family comfort. Charles makes a rather sorry figure as son, scholar, and doctor throughout the novel; he is not to be distinguished from his bourgeois neighbors, except that he is less successful, but in one respect his character is heroic. His love survives the loss of his wife's affection for himself and their child, the loss of his property, the loss of his belief in her chastity, and the loss of her life. From beyond the grave she exercises her spell upon him; his woe is so great that, having no one else to share it with, he finally turns to Boulanger, absolving him from blame. To Charles, Emma's sins are the "fault of fatality," and he dies still in love with her. Perfect love endureth all things—but where does one find it? Had she been able, Emma might have found it legitimately, in her husband. Were this not so, Madame Bovary would be far less extraordinary. Although the action of the novel, Emma's action, is finished, the last three chapters are needed to complete the structure. Without them, the theme, if guessed at all, would be insecure.

In these last three chapters Charles reveals that love is not the wild glorious radiance of the romantics nor yet the cosy tame comfort of the bourgeois. Though Charles is dirt under Emma's feet, yet he sustains her. The base of the pyramid which Emma's actions erect, he serves in the structure of the novel as a type of perfect love. The structural outline exemplifies his role. He is akin to Catherine Leroux, the stupid saintly peasant at the apex of the novel: "for fifty-four years of service on the same farm, a silver medal—value, twenty-five francs." But the "radiant" bourgeois are wrong. Its value is beyond calculation. So with Charles' love, which gives whatever it has of value to Emma's character. This is the significance of the structure of Madame Bovary.

Central Washington College of Education