

Madame Bovary & Eugénie Grandet

Two timeless novels, two great characters (Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856)). Everyone in *Madame Bovary* seems cast as a type, sometimes distractingly so (Homais). Emma Bovary herself is a tragic heroine in the classic sense, a woman defined entirely by her sexuality, inexorably driven by her character to play out her fate almost without choice or conscious will. Eugénie Grandet is a more nuanced character and the product of many influences, especially of course her father's monomaniacal miserliness, but also religion and the impulse to love.

Flaubert single-mindedly characterizes Emma as a sexual being and her tragedy follows inexorably. Her religious experiences are instructive. Catholicism deeply understands both the importance and the power of sexuality, procreation being one of its abiding preoccupations. Like all good things provided by God, they would say, sexuality is positive, but must be channeled properly in godly and socially useful ways (procreation and child-rearing in marriage). Emma fused religion and sex, the latter being literally sacred to her.

That might be expected in an impressionable young woman of the day with little fuel for her developing sexual mania (no movies, videos, music!). People building their character reach for the tools at hand. Religion and the mass in particular provided one of her only outlets for deep feeling, clothed now with all the trappings of high sentiment and art. The old Catholic mass was designed to induce meditation — the vaulting and dark interior inhabited by dimly lit sacred art, the strikingly dressed man at the front with his back to you mumbling an exotic ancient language, the ritualistic coordinated movement (kneel, stand, sit), all the talk of body and blood, incense wafting throughout. People being people, those reveries didn't always involve the sacred. Or, more aptly in the case of Emma, she thought what she liked without guilt, redefining what is sacred.

When near death after Rodolphe's betrayal, Emma experienced a moment of religious ecstasy in a memorable passage. But even that isn't quite right as the curé notices — "he did feel that Emma's religion might, by its very fervor, develop into something that verged on heresy and even extravagance". In fact there was no repentance whatever, an absolute prerequisite for true union with God in Catholicism. It wouldn't occur to her to confess real sexual sins, that carries a promise to reform — invented ones for effect were more her vein, the better to hear more about the heavenly lover.

Even at the convent school, the aristocratic old lady smuggled in romantic novels enjoyed by many of the girls. With literature too, Emma took what she needed. Her reading wasn't all trash either, Sir Walter Scott and Chateaubriand's *Atala* being mentioned (the latter a name she considered for her child). One approach is to say that such literature corrupted her. My thought is

otherwise — that Emma was intent on "corrupting" herself and, as with religion, she drew what she needed from her immediate environment.

Virtually all the many descriptions of Emma portray her as a sexual being, even when alone and in repose (the latter a highly unnatural state for Madame, granted). She likes to observe herself, literally and figuratively, and those are sexualized scenes too — looking in the mirror after the first tryst with Rodolphe, "some subtle influence had transfigured her whole being". The press of allusion is so intense that even the seemingly innocent becomes fraught. After her rough trip to Yonville, for example, she expresses enjoyment of upheavals and is well understood by a potential lover; when horse-riding with her about-to-be lover Rodolphe, she falls into a "rhythmic rocking in the saddle". Such references could be multiplied indefinitely.

Her beautiful hair is mentioned repeatedly, a deeply sexual signifier. With Rodolphe, "Emma would grope her way, blinking her eyes, dewdrops clinging to her smoothly parted hair in a topaz halo that framed her face." In the French text, the word rendered here as halo is *auréole*, suggestive of a nipple. A simple game of cards becomes highly erotic for Leon — the coil of hair, the billowing dress, following a shadow down her back until disappearing within, the imperceptible touch like a shock. Though proceeding from Leon's point of view, this is a straightforward reflection of Emma's inner nature.

Emma felt that her sexuality was something refined, something noble. Consider her effect on the cynical rake Rodolphe, "his nature coarse and his intelligence shrewd; he had a broad experience of women and was something of a connoisseur". At first he is deaf to her professions of deep love, he'd heard it all before from the most debauched lips and discounted such talk. But he came to understand her sincerity and is disquieted and attracted by the purity of her sexuality, her "love without debauchery". "What a woman!", he says to himself at one point, carried away by her erotic power.

That she radiated sexuality to men and attracted them powerfully is evident in her husband and lovers, but most poignantly also with simple young Justin, who was as bereft as Charles when she died — what a scene when he would watch her brush her hair, he quietly transfixed and she kindly dismissive, like pharaoh's wife who would disrobe without a thought in front of a slave boy.

Emma's ambitions centered on occupying a position in society where she could proceed sexually untrammelled by the conventions demanded from someone like her. She learned at the ball that she could match those society trollops, given a chance. Why couldn't she proceed like Marie Antoinette, who was decidedly not bound by such conventions — think of the drooling old debauchee at the ball dinner who in days past was her lover between two other named monsieurs.

Her anger too is explained by frustration of sexual plans and feelings, the necessity to prevaricate about her most meaningful and sublime activities. The main source of her ongoing anger at Charles was exactly that he had a social claim to sympathy, considering her behavior, a claim she resented and absolutely refused to honor.

Emma was a woman of action, driven by her character to her fate — "something more powerful

than herself kept driving her to him". She died like Othello died and for the same reason, crushed and driven to her doom by the obsession that possessed her.

The paramount type in *Eugénie Grandet*, of course, is her miserly father, one of the great portraits in western literature, the slide into caricature notwithstanding. The passage on his studied stammer is timeless. Just when you think there's nothing more outrageous to be said, Balzac surpasses himself. One example is the scene where the old reprobate had to think twice about prizing the jewels from Charles's box even after Eugénie threatened suicide on the spot if he did, all the women of the household assuring him Eugénie meant business — "father, in the name of my life, don't touch that box!"

There are other cutout types in the novel, but also characters who are more complex, arguably including the worldly old curé and certainly Big Nanon, an attractive working-class character beyond the ken of Flaubert, at least in *Madame Bovary*, of whom Balzac says truly, "God will recognize his angels by the tones of their voices and their hidden sorrows".

Consider Eugénie, "a typical example of (the Virgin) Mary's celestial purity in this world", indicative of "an unconscious innate nobility." This is perhaps the role Balzac conceived for her when starting the novel, but story-teller that he is, she becomes more complex as the novel proceeds, inheriting some of her father's traits as well as his goods. The crux of the tale is in what she takes from him and what she leaves behind.

By necessity, Eugénie shared the virtually monastic way of life demanded by her father while he was alive (Balzac compares the Grandet home to a gloomy cloister in the very first sentence), and she continued to live modestly after his death as well. Her thrift was of a diametrically different kind than his, deriving from habit and simple lack of interest in worldly things and money in particular.

She inherited her father's stubbornness, witness her fidelity to Charles over many years without a word from him. His strength too, shown when she confronted him in the gripping scene mentioned above when she defied this dominating and abusive man whose word was law in his household and who was "quite capable of beating us", according to Madame Grandet. Eugénie is unfazed, recognized by the old tyrant as "more of a Grandet than I am." Eugénie goes against type in this scene, incidentally, suicide being absolutely forbidden for a devout Catholic, the one unforgivable sin (as opposed to Emma Bovary, whose suicide was in keeping with her fate).

The letters Eugénie exchanged with Charles on his return underscore her pride, intelligence, and moral beauty. The calculating Charles returns the 6,000 francs she lent him at the end of a transparently insincere letter (with interest, adding insult to injury), showing him to be as grasping as old Grandet, but without the latter's intelligence. Eugénie, stung to the core, "remembering (her mother's) prophetic life and death, foresaw her whole destiny at a glance. All that was left to her was to unfold her wings, reach out to heaven, and live in prayer until the day of her deliverance."

She responds with a simple letter accompanied by 1,500,000 francs to clear his father's bankruptcy and provide for his advancement. Her agent tells Charles in person that this is a small part of her fortune. She all but says, "Money is so very important to you, take it! It means nothing to me. You could have had it all, and true love as well, but no."

She inherits Big Nanon too, who finds love and basks in happiness under Mademoiselle's protection after old Grandet's death. His loyal slave in life, when he died Nanon became a loyal friend to Eugénie, indeed her proxy. Eugénie becomes a philanthropist at large, one who cares for others, the exact opposite of her father.

The portrait of pure first love is one of the most moving I've ever read, the "purest, the sweetest, but also the most wholehearted of kisses" echoing down the ages. Believable too, as Balzac develops Eugénie's character and underscores her isolation and lack of outlet for loving feelings — "for the first time in her life, her generous instincts, which had been dormant and repressed but were now suddenly awakened, were being constantly wounded." She even momentarily touched the superficial Charles, soon to show himself a criminal (monster really, as he struck out to make his fortune). True love is everything to Eugénie, money "only a means to an end", as she tells Charles when sending him off with her life's savings early on, to the fury of her father. These feelings are sacred to Eugénie as she grafts her religious feeling onto her beloved, an ideal "like Goethe's Marguerite, but a Marguerite without the sin."

The novel veers quickly and seamlessly from the comic and even grotesque to the dead serious. Take the great war between the Cruchots and the des Grassins for Eugénie's hand. Highly entertaining in its own right, this episode serves to illuminate Eugénie, who is blissfully unaware at first, but later parries their schemes effortlessly with a sexless marriage of convenience (the Virgin Mary!) that augmented her estate when she outlasts her unworthy husband. She had learned to "see clearly into the hearts of others" as her father had.

Eugénie's approach to religion comes straight from her mother rather than her atheistic father. Balzac associates Eugénie's goodness with her religious feeling, comparing her explicitly with the Virgin Mary at many points. He brings her back to type at the end, an angel far removed from her demonic father on central things even as she inherited so much of his character.

As with types, so with ideas. Repeatedly citing Christianity as the source of all that is good, Balzac had no compunction in designating it as the miser's religion. Balzac himself cannot be contained by any type or category ("A Monarchist Marxists Could Love" according to the *New York Times* on the 200th anniversary of his birth) and the same is true of his magnificent creation, the beautiful and unforgettable Eugénie Grandet.

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