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The Significance of the Insignificant’s Significance over the Significant: The Function of Literary Realism in *Madame Bovary*

Gustave Flaubert’s novel, *Madame Bovary*, has often been considered an exemplary example of literary realism, a technique in literature that, in contrast to romantic texts, faithfully represents reality in a very literal fashion often creating long, seemingly boring passages within an otherwise engaging story. One such passage in *Madame Bovary* is the drawn-out description of Emma Bovary’s journey aboard the *Hirondelle* to visit her lover Leon (232-234). Describing everything from “the pale tints of…its [the pharmacists’] sign” to “lines of apple trees” aboard the journey, this passage seems overly concerned with the minutiae of the pedestrian, often deviating from Emma to dwell on, “women holding baskets” (232- 234). Nevertheless, the overemphasis on the ordinary within this passage serves not only to provide context for Emma’s journey, but also to undermine her perception of reality. This passage serves as a moment in which literary realism reacts directly to a character’s perceptions. By shifting his style of imagery from realistic to romantic—a style that is often exaggerated or fantastical—Flaubert undermines the notion of idealism in the form of dramatic irony by effectively entrapping his characters fantasies in the confines of literary realism.

The perceived insignificance of this passage is derived directly from Flaubert’s emphasis on the ordinary and repetitious writing style, both of which are characteristics of literary realism. While this passage does focus mainly on Emma’s journey, it often deviates from Emma herself, discussing the lives of other characters plainly such as the clerks who, “were polishing the shop windows” or “Mere Lefrancois, who…was charging him [Hivert] with commissions” (232 - 234). In doing so it diverts the attention of the reader to seemingly insignificant characters, further drawing out the passage. Additionally, the passage uses sleep imagery in its descriptions, establishing Artemise as, “yawning” or Mere Lefrancois as, “putting her head in its nightcap” (232). By referring to “nightcaps” and “yawning” within the passage, Flaubert creates a very lethargic, drowsy tone that, while seemingly inconsequential, is associated with the slow, ordinary realities of a realistic lifestyle and literally lulls the readers to sleep. Nevertheless, many of these details, while contributing to the dry tone of the passage, also add to its realistic nature.

Even when the passage does focus on Emma, it often does so in a repetitious tone, contributing significantly to both its perceived insignificance and literary realism. Often Emma can recall the journey so vividly, “she knew that after a pasture there came a signpost…an elm, a barn” (232). Not only does this indicate a repetitious cycle but the imagery used, “elm”, “barn”, “signpost” is indefinite and generic, demonstrating its insignificance (232). Another source of the perceived insignificance of the passage is Flaubert’s focus on repetitious action or habit. More specifically, to indicate repetitious action, Flaubert incorporates the imperfect tense within his text. By saying that, “The *Hirondelle* would set off at a gentle trot” instead of ‘The *Hirondelle* set of at a gentle trot’, Flaubert implies that the *Hirondelle* had made multiple instances of this journey (232). This focus on habit is another indicator of realism, since a real-life Emma Bovary would have also made a habit out of visiting Rouen. Ultimately, while this passage may seem to the casual reader drawn out and inconsequential due to its its repetitious time cycles and sharp attention to detail, it is these very elements that make it a prime example of literary realism. This literary realism will serve to contrast the romantic or exaggerated imagery presented later in the passage.

The description of the city of Rouen and Emma’s subsequent reaction presents a deviation from Flaubert’s depiction of the ordinary to a description that is sublime, grand, and exaggerated in nature. The city is not simply coming into view, it is “descending like an amphitheater…drowned in fog” (233). Likewise, the smog emanating from the factories is described grandiosely as “immense brown plumes” (233). This visual imagery and subsequent auditory references such as the “rumbling of the foundries” creates a very sensory experience for the reader, something that is not present in the more realistic parts of the passage (233). Additionally, there is a shift in tense during this passage. While Emma’s journey before and after the *Hirondelle* is presented in the imperfect tense, characterized by the repetitious passage of time and the use of ‘would’, Flaubert’s description of the city is presented in the simple past tense. The word ‘rose’ in “the open country rose beyond in a monotonous sweep” versus the use of the phrase ‘had been rising’ implies a sense of immediacy to the city as it comes into view (233) contributing to its emphasis in the passage. This deviation in writing and use of the simple past tense casts highlights just how important the of Rouen is as compared to other generic objects such as the ‘elm’, ‘barn’ and ‘signpost’ that appeared repetitively in the imperfect tense (232). Through this change in tense, as well as the sublime imagery used, Rouen is presented, at least on the surface, as significantly exaggerated metropolis. Emma would absorb this view of Rouen which would nonetheless be undermined by later literary realism in the passage.

Emma’s reaction to the city’s grandiose nature exposes her own attachment to the sublime, regal, and extravagant. While on the *Hirondelle*, Emma’s “heart swelled hugely with” the passion emanating from the “crowded lives” of the city of Rouen (233). The way Emma looks at the city only to see “the stream of passion she supposed they [the people of Rouen] possessed” demonstrates her prime assumption that all people of Rouen have a passionate, extravagant life (233). Moreover, Emma believes that she can attain this very same passion simply by entering the city. In a sense Emma believes that she is sponge like, “her love grow[ing] larger in the presence of this space[Rouen],” only to “pour this love back out” on her adventures with Leon (233). This focus on love as an absorbable quantity suggests that Emma can never truly attain love, she can only take it from other people for redistribution, much like she redistributes Charles’s love to her lovers, Rodolphe and Leon. By treating love as a redistributable object, she attributes it not to the people of Rouen, but rather “the squares, the promenades, the streets” of the city itself (233). Her comparison of the city to “some Babylon” furthers this idea (233). By drawing a comparison to an ancient heavenly city, Emma distances her notion of Rouen away from its people, and towards a magical, lavish paradise. Emma does not believe that she is on a stagecoach traveling to Rouen, she believes the more romantic view that she is flying atop an actual *Hirondelle*, or swallow, towards the city of her dreams. This attribution of magic and passion to the city of Rouen without regard to its people demonstrates Emma’s surface level thinking and explains her attraction to passion. Emma simply believes that just because the city looks “like some immense metropolis”, that everyone in the city lives extravagantly, and consequently, she must live a lavish, passionate life within its confines (233).

However, Emma’s view of the city is instantly contradicted by the literary realism that manifests itself later in the passage. Almost immediately, the readers are introduced to “townsfolk who had slept in the Bois-Guillaume,” a commune for the poor within the city from which families are traveling at the same time Emma is daydreaming about the luxuries of the city (233). Even when Emma walks through the city to visit Leon, she fails to notice the working class, specifically the, “clerks...polishing the shop windows” and the “waiters in aprons” (234). By grouping individuals together by jobs (i.e. ‘waiters’ instead of ‘a waiter’), Flaubert establishes the norm for the city of Rouen. It is common for waiters to, “scatter sand over the paving stones” simply because there are multiple waiters (234). These small details, seemingly inconsequential before, are now essential in building a contrast to Emma’s perception of Rouen. In a sense, Rouen is comprised of the same working class, pedestrian struggles that the Yonville residents face. The juxtaposition of Emma’s romantic daydreams and Flaubert’s literary realism creates a sort of dramatic irony within the novel. Readers are aware of the literary realism present in the city of Rouen at the same time at which Emma dreams about their supposed extravagant lifestyle. This dramatic irony not only undermines Emma’s surface level perception of Rouen, but destabilizes the sublime view of Rouen that was presented earlier in the passage.

The destabilization of romantic style literature through literary realism in this passage demonstrates Emma’s idealistic personality. By sandwiching the exaggerated sublime view of Rouen from the *Hirondelle* between a lethargic, drowsy description of Yonville and a contradictory pedestrian view of Rouen, Flaubert effectively traps Emma’s fantastical view of the city within the confines of literary realism. What starts with a slow, dry description of “lines of apple trees” transitions to a grandiose view of the “rumbling of the foundries” and the “clear chimes of the churches” that characterize an ideal metropolis which once again reduces to a city that smells of “absinthe, cigars, and oysters” (232-234). This stylistic entrapment of Emma’s perception reflects Emma’s personality. Had she been able to see beyond her infatuation with the, “factory chimneys expel[ling] immense brown plumes” she might have noticed that the city is “drowned in fog” signifying pollution (233). The fact that she ignores details of reality that contradict her fantasy demonstrates Emma’s idealism. This stylistic structure, where literary realism serves to undermine a character’s idealism also manifests itself with Charles, Emma’s husband.

Like Emma, we see Charles’s idealism towards the perception of his wife is undermined directly by her funeral’s material consequences. Throughout the novel, Emma has always been Charles’s ideal wife, finding her, “utterly irresistible” and even, respecting, “himself more because he possessed such a wife” (36). His romanticized view of Emma is so extreme, that he goes to great lengths in interring Emma, wanting “her to be buried in her wedding dress,” and surprising his colleagues with his, “romantic ideas” (292). This exaggerated view of Emma from Charles’s perspective is immediately undermined when Emma is referred to blandly as an “unfortunate young woman” by the apothecary (293). In fact, during this funeral ceremony, the priest and pharmacist erupt into a discussion on religion. Even Emma, who Charles wanted to be buried with, “a large piece of green velvet,” is described sickeningly, yet realistically with eyes, “beginning to disappear in a viscous pallor” (293). Not only do these events take away from the ideal funeral that Charles wished to have for his supposedly beautiful and faithful wife, but they create dramatic irony that forms a more realistic experience. In this case, we see that Charles romanticized view of his wife’s funeral is ultimately undermined by realism, comparable to how the realistic view of Rouen undermines Emma’s fantastical perception.

Ultimately, the seemingly inconsequential use of literary realism within *Madame Bovary* is an essential counter to the idealism of its characters. Amid the frustratingly sharp minutiae and repetitive action, exists important details that serve to counter character worldviews, whether it is the perception of a city (Emma) or the perception of a funeral (Charles). Through the repetition of this technique Flaubert introduces a greater debate between idealism and realism: is it worth it to indulge in fantasy or is it better to prepare for realistic consequence?

Dear Ankit,

I really appreciate how closely your essay sticks to the prompt. You provide us with a “phenomenology” (a description of the experience) of our reading of the Hirondelle ride, and I think you really flesh out what it means for the text to be “undermining” Emma’s projective fantasy of the city of Rouen. The essay is strongest because of its body paragraphs: I found your topic sentences as well as the concluding sentences of each paragraph to be very confident, precise, and argumentative. Likewise, your close reading of the text is both thoughtful and careful. I had some concerns about your use of certain terms (“tone” “technique,” “(over)exaggerated) that I thought could have been more precise or accurate, but for the most part I still was able to follow the points you were making. I thought the essay trailed off just a bit in the perhaps too-quick turn to Charles, but I do think you draw an interesting parallel there. I am not completely convinced that Flaubert is staging a “debate” between realism and idealism, exactly: your conclusion seems to suggest that Flaubert wants us to pick one or the other, but another way of looking at it is that he is showing us the flaws of each. In any case, very good work here. A-

Very Best,

Jordan