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Explication: Passage from Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

This paper examines Part Two, page 49 to the top paragraph on page 52, of Flaubert's Madame Bovary. This passage provides a description of Yonville and the surrounding countryside. Emma and Charles are enroute to Yonville to take up residence. Emma, of course, is seeks a change, but the reader learns in this passage that she will encounter in Yonville all the same characteristics of provincial life she loathes and believes she is leaving behind in Tostes. She apparently associates experience with a place and not with the people in that place.

The passage contains informal language with concrete images. Because this version of the novel is a translation, scrutiny of individual words cannot be considered to flush out fine detail. However, individual words mentioned represent part of a group that exhibit a recognized pattern. Flaubert's words are carefully chosen to convey an impression without making subjective comments. The narrator remains relatively objective, without offering personal comment. Thus, visual observations of the countryside and town reveal the nature of the people who live there. The reader, then, is able to form an accurate sense about the people, although no people have yet been introduced.

This passage reads like a travelogue and seems to mirror Emma's longing to travel. The irony is that because the area lacks any special scenic beauty, historical interest, or excitement, Emma probably wouldn't choose to travel to Yonville. And Flaubert flavors the passage with satire, because the same reason Emma wouldn't choose to travel here, this country isn't worthy of a travelogue. Indeed, only up until recently, no serviceable road into the area allowed decent traveling conditions. A road finally built serves only as a "cross-cut road" joining another town to the highway and used "occasionally. . . by Rouen teamsters on their way to Flanders" (49). In other words, people didn't build this road to travel to Yonville. Clearly, this indicates a disinterest in and a lack of importance of this town. The road is used simply to pass through. Curiously, the opening sentence of Part Two states that "Yonville-l'Abbate. . . is a market-town" (49). If this is true, it seems a road would have been built long ago. In addition, we're told that Yonville "has remained stationary in spite of its 'new outlet'" (49). It seems, then, their only customers would be their own townspeople. Calling Yonville a market-town seems a gross exaggeration of its importance. For, even with the advantage of a serviceable road, the town hasn't grown or changed. Instead, Yonville appears to have minor importance as a community.

The countryside around Yonville fails in importance, as well. Although a "little" river runs through the country, it holds little interest as a fishing place to fish because it contains only a "few" trout. There's just enough fish to "entertain" the village boys on Sundays. Fish is a common symbol of Christianity. If seen as a religious symbol, then, the implication would be religious atrophy. Later, encountering the town's church, the implication of this religious symbol becomes more significant.

Yonville also enjoys the distinction that "the worst Neufchatel cheeses in the arrondissement are made here" (49). This is a second sign that food is inadequate. Also, the wheat crops must be inferior. The narrator mentions that "farming is costly" because the land has "brittle soil, [and is] full of sand and stones," not an ideal soil for growing wheat---or much else, for that matter (49). The wheat fields here are described as "blond." Wheat fields are usually thought of as "golden." "Blond," in this sense, appears pallid and sickly. This characterization of the wheat fields is consistent with the food images of fish and cheese. So, three food images are presented, and all are inferior. Yonville clearly has questionable capability providing even the basics. Fish, cheese, and wheat are thought of as staples. The farmers, "instead of improving the soil they persist in keeping up the pasture lands, however depreciated they may be in value" (50). This statement suggests that the area may even be poor for grazing cattle. In that case, milk and beef would be inferior products, as well.

It begins to emerge that Yonville could not truly be a market-town. Certainly, they wouldn't be able to sell cheese, fresh fish, or wheat, and possibly other dairy products and beef. But, beyond their inability to sell good products, this town is conspicuously unable to nourish itself. Symbolically, they are unable to nourish themselves psychologically. Why would a town call itself a "market-town" when it's clear they don't have adequate resources to bring to market, and it's obvious that people aren't coming into Yonville? The marketplace, then, is dysfunctional (to use a 20th Century term) and this town lives under a cloud of self-deception. For Emma, this distorted atmosphere could possibly compound an already disordered view of the world.

The countryside has no distinguishing characteristics, although the terms used to describe it aren't neutral, either. Its own landscape paints itself with a negative shade. Such words as "bulge," "scarred," "irregular," "mongrel," "manure," and "brittle" are used to describe it. Curiously, though, amidst the lackluster descriptions of this countryside, a single sentence of beauty leaps out. The narrator describes a rivulet of water that flows through the meadows: "the country is like a great unfolded mantle with a green velvet cape bordered with a fringe of silver" (49). The image of "green velvet" is plush and rich; and the "silver fringe" adds elegance. This one small shimmering bit of beauty appears like a mirage. Perhaps this symbolizes Emma's endless searching for excitement and elegance. Like any mirage, it takes its form only at a distance. When coming close, it disappears. Likewise, Emma continually chases the images of her imagination like mirages. However, once she comes close to what she believes she wants, the image becomes less than desirable.

Our tour proceeds through the countryside and finally reaches the edge of town. So far, the travelogue fails to show a countryside that would entice us as visitors. We find also that the town's attraction falls short. By now we have a fair sense of the quality and capacity of the people. The town and its inhabitants are described by such words as: depreciated, lazy, plain, sprawling, straggling, and meager (50). The descriptions bear a kinship with Charles' character. Charles feels at home in this kind of town, so there's a parallel identity between them. Another intriguing parallel can be argued between Charles and the thatched roofs. The roofs look "like fur caps drawn over eyes, reach down over about a third of the low window" (50). This strange visual image of a cap reminds us of the peculiar cap Charles' brought to school. The vision of thatch reaching down, covering "about a third of the low window," resembles a slow-witted person---a definite characteristic of Charles.

Passing by the notary's house we note an ornament there: a Cupid with his finger on his lips. The "finger" is a recurrent image in this novel. Emma pricked her finger on her dried up bridal bouquet; in another scene she stands at the window with her finger at her lips; and finally, she puts the arsenic in her mouth with her fingers. The Cupid's pose could be shadowing Emma's final, gruesome act and her horrifying death. Because this Cupid stands inactive, he could also symbolize impotence: the inability of Emma to find love and the excitement she craves.

Across the street is the town's only church. This church reveals probably the most incriminating evidence of the nature of these townsfolk. The roof of the church is rotting, "black hollows" appear in the "blue paint," there is no organ, the glass in the windows is plain, the choir stalls are of unpainted pine, and "straw mats" reveal some parishioners' pews. The most amazing feature of this church is the Madonna. She wears a satin dress with a "tulle veil sprinkled with silver stars," and her cheeks are "stained red like an idol of the Sandwich Islands." And finally, on the main altar stands a plaque entitled "The Holy Family, a gift from the Minister of the Interior." One hardly knows were to begin explicating this shipwreck of a church.

Beginning with a symbol of shelter, we find that the roof is rotting. A roof provides shelter for everyone beneath it so a rotting roof suggests that religion on all levels in this town is crumbling, from the clergy to the congregation. An old piece of wisdom says that if the head of the fish is rotten, so goes the body. The top of the church would signify the head. The clergy is suspect, born out by Emma's experience when seeking the priest's advice. He was totally insensitive to her anguish, and she left in frustration. Next, the black hollows that appear in the blue paint seem ominous. The visual image is dark and strange. We don't know if the blue paint is on the outside or the inside. However, either way, blue is a peculiar color to paint a church, which are usually white. I'm not clear about the meaning of the black holes, but the image is

startling. It foreshadows, perhaps, Emma's deathbed scene when her body develops brown spots. It may also suggest that the church is dying. Next, this congregation doesn't have the luxury of an organ. Without it, one wonders how the music can be inspirational. The choir stalls are made of the cheapest wood--pine--and they remain bare and unpainted. Most churches have stained glass windows, but this one has only plain glass--another feature wholly uninspiring.

The Plaque on the alter is in extremely bad taste, which appears like advertising. On it, the name of the donor overshadows "The Holy Family." Such a display of vanity shows the corrupted value system of these people. Their interest in the material world only pays lip service to their deity, where they worship uninspired, under a rotting roof. The sexton, whose job is to take care of church property, cares more for making money from the dead, or from his tuber crop.

Finally, the Madonna, one of the strangest features of this church. The satin and a tulle veil sprinkled with silver stars that she wears is reminiscent of a bridal dress, or even a ball gown. A Madonna wearing such a costume gives a sense of defilement, especially with red stained cheeks---red, of course, represents passion. One can't miss the pagan image, and the suggested theme of religion in decay. This Madonna has been thoroughly cheapened, emphasizing the disintegration of the church. Perhaps this strange Madonna parallels Emma's romantic ideas of religion, which is a profanation of religion's true intent. In addition, the Madonna could be symbolic of the defilement of her own marriage by adultery.

It seems, from the narrator's description, the graveyard is "home" to more dead than living in this town. There are so many tombs that they "continue to crowd together towards the gate" (50). That the tombs *continue* crowding together towards the gate gives them motion and creates an illusion that the dead are trying to leave. The dead, it would appear, are wiser than the living. In addition, the newer area of the graveyard is "almost deserted"---the newly dead won't even be buried here.

The tour reaches town and we encounter a wondrous structure, with Ionic columns, arched windows, and a crowning frieze. This building resembles a "sort of Greek temple," which we're told, is the town hall. The frieze, like the Madonna, is a curious oddity. A picture of a Gallic cock rests one foot on the Charter and holds the scales of Justice in the other foot (51). If you actually picture this, you realize how ridiculous it is. For this cock, holding the scales of justice must be a miraculous feat (pun intended). Does this poor bird hold them up breast high with his foot? Or, just hangs onto them as they drag on the ground? And, he does this while standing on one foot. . . .no, he's only resting one foot on the Charter, which means he's not actually standing on it. Maybe this bird is being suspended in midair by a wire so the scales of justice are suspended properly, and he only appears to be resting on one foot. However, it's done, I'm sure it has to be seen to be appreciated. In any event, this town hall sounds like the grandest structure in town. It's a palace compared to the miserable little church, which again emphasizes that the town's value system is clearly oriented towards politics and commerce rather than religion.

The pharmacy, is another unique spectacle. Red and green jars "embellish" the shop-front, and in the evening when the lamp is lit up, they "cast their colored reflection far across the street" (51). These cast an illusion more like stained glass windows, more suitable in the church. Advertisements adorn the plaster on the house "from top to bottom," advertising everything from Seltzer water to laxative chocolate. A signboard stretches the entire breadth of the shop, and spells out "Homais, Pharmacist" in gold letters. On the wall, at the back of the shop, a scroll blazons, "Laboratory," and above that is the word "Homais" repeated in gold letters. The image is quite impressive because a Laboratory is where one presumably does very important things. However, we learn later that this so-called Laboratory is really only a closet.

Before ever meeting the pharmacist, the reader has a strong sense of the man's character. That gold spells out his name, reveals a man with a healthy ego. The pharmacist keeps a jar of "spongy white lumps"--fetuses--rotting in cloudy alcohol. No doubt, he intends these to be impressive, but they sound more disgusting than impressive. Symbolically, the dead fetuses represent infertility, and certainly, death. The symbolism strongly suggests that the way of life in this town is rotting and, also, foreshadows Emma's doom. As Emma lays dying, the brown spots appearing on her body give an illusion that it is rotting.

In a small community, the church is usually the center of life. But in this town, the church sits rotting and life centers around town hall and the pharmacy. This is a corruption of what community life should be. Flaubert's subtle criticism of provincial life's dull, unimaginative routines echoes all through this passage. The dull landscape and decaying way of life are foils to Emma's vivid imagination. Even though Flaubert's descriptions of the countryside are dull and uninteresting, he maintains the reader's interest because it's relatively short, only about a page in length. The travelogue quickly moves on towards town where images become strange, but intriguing. For example, the sexton and the tubers growing in the graveyard is humorous, if not sick. And the amazing Madonna keeps the description of the church from becoming too dull. In a sense, this passage moves mediocrity along.

Overall, this passage solidifies Emma's coming doom, showing that the same unenlightened, tedious provincial life she leaves behind in Tostes too closely resembles life in Yonville. The theme of relentless lethargy and boredom that runs throughout the novel, is reinforced here. These are the agents that propel Emma to self-destruction. Emma cannot hope to find in Yonville what she's seeking. Though Emma has "matured," it's only a maturing of her immaturity---of her fantastical, imaginary life. Her self-centered attitudes have been firmly planted. And doubtless, she's incapable of changing. The reader is being rehearsed for the ultimate fall that is sure to come. Emma will continue on her collision course. The passage is full of images of decay and death and gives no reason to believe otherwise. A series of three is the point at which the brain first recognizes a pattern. This is the third town Emma will live in---it will be no different from the other two. In this passage, the pattern is established---Emma's fate is sealed.