

WORK AND LOVE

ORAL FIXATION IN GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S *MADAME BOVARY*

In attempting to rationalize the human experience, Sigmund Freud declared, "Work and love...love and work, that's all there is," (Freud 17). That value statement personifies no one more precisely than French author Gustave Flaubert. Known to fastidiously hone every sentence he wrote to rhetorical perfection, Flaubert typically labored for hours on end, ceasing in the early hours of the morning only to craft meticulously-detailed missives to his lover, Louise Colet (Davis ix). Despite his lackluster, dichotomized routine, Flaubert's correspondence and journals unveil a hidden lust for material pleasures, a lust that disavows the subtextual disparagement of romanticism that permeates his work. Food, alcohol, prostitutes—he professes deep-rooted cravings for these provincially-scarce commodities (Vargas Llosa). While such latent desires may appear disparate from the Freudian *work and love* structure of his life, in reality, these yearnings indicate the presence of a larger psychosexual complex: oral fixation. When over- or under-breastfed in infancy, postulated Freud, people develop subconscious compulsions towards or against oral imagery (Freud 617).¹ Oral fixation engenders behavior such as nail-biting and smoking or, as in the case of Flaubert, obsessions with alcohol, food, and sex. Moreover, his oral fixation transcends mere habit; Flaubert's novels reflect his condition through his employment of vivid imagery and structural elements pertaining to the mouth. This subliminal influence presents itself most strongly in his literary chef-d'oeuvre, *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert often acknowledged his enduring affinity for the character of Emma Bovary, a woman whose prolific wants conflict with her insufficient means. The heavy presence of oral imagery in her narrative—particularly her tragic end—reinforces Flaubert's psychological identification with her. Thus, the manifestations of Flaubert's oral fixation in the scenes of Emma's death expose his subconscious fear that his suppressed material longings will consume him in the manner of his heroine.

Throughout the early stages of Emma's death where she can still act freely, Flaubert's implementation of oral motifs foreshadows not only the death of Emma but also his own. After facing Rodolphe's rejection of her desperate plea for financial support, Emma ventures into Homais' storeroom, "thrust[s] her hand" into the jar of arsenic, "and, withdrawing it full of white powder, beg[ins] to eat it" (Flaubert 279). Symbolically, her ingestion of the arsenic marks a drastic change; until this moment, Emma's mouth has emitted verbal poison through her lies and manipulation, so through consuming the arsenic, she reverses the flow of toxins. Moreover,

¹ Given the heavy reliance upon wet nurses in nineteenth century France, Flaubert's case likely corroborates Freud's theory.

Flaubert juxtaposes Emma's unwavering will to die—she “thrust[s] her hand” instead of merely reaching it—onto his innocuous description of the arsenic as a simple “white powder.” By magnifying her behavior and devaluing the substance, he textually reinforces the idea that Emma instigates her own downfall. But subconsciously, he expresses a terror of losing control of himself to excess, to materiality, to a flour-like chemical resting in a jar. He fears not the arsenic but rather the impaired judgment necessary to consume it. His oral fixation (and thereby his latent fears) resurfaces similarly when Emma, given a crucifix, “press[es] her lips to the body of the Man-God” and “with all her expiring strength” offers it “the most passionate kiss of love she had ever given” (Flaubert 288). The ceremonial ritual of unctions and crucifix-kissing reads betrays less information than Flaubert's fetishized, erogenous description of it. Rather than referring to the crucifix by its name, he objectifies it by the corporeal image it bears. Additionally, he calls Jesus a “Man-God” as though he were a legitimate target of sexual desire instead of a religious icon. For Emma, this rhetorical eroticization alludes to her inexorable appetite for passion, but for Flaubert, it signifies something deeper: a fear that he will face divine retribution for his own sexual promiscuity. Through Louise Colet, he vicariously adulterated; through female prostitutes, he fornicated; through male prostitutes, he sodomized (Steegmuller 64). While Flaubert, like his bourgeois-in-chief, Homais, eschewed the narrow-mindedness of Christian convention, the pervasive cultural influence of theology in his childhood likely imbued him with a latent fear of godly punishment. Just as Emma prepares to die from her own doing, so too Flaubert worries that his sexuality will dictate his mortality. His oral imagery connects Emma's experience to his own fears, reiterating the Freudian dyad of work and love.

The parallels between Emma's degeneration and Flaubert's psychosexual fears proliferate as she descends into passivity. One morning, “an acrid taste in her mouth [wakes] her...that hideous taste of ink” (Flaubert 280). This description syntactically displays Emma's waning control: Emma becomes the object receiving the action of “waking”; it is the “acrid taste” that performs the action in the sentence. Moreover, as Emma weakens, Flaubert's voice reaches nearly metafictional heights as he compares the “acrid taste in her mouth” to “ink,” the medium in which he wrote *Madame Bovary*. His direct self-reference indicates an elevated psychosexual connection with Emma; perhaps his fear of passivity manifested more consciously in his writing process than his fear of material or sexual impulses. The hint of free indirect style through value judgments such as “hideous” and “acrid” corroborates the notion of a more blatant oral fixation influence. Later, Flaubert narrates that Emma begins to “vomit blood” and that “her lips press together more tightly” (Flaubert 284). While by consuming the arsenic Emma changes the direction of the flow of poison, she now regains the role of expelling unpleasant fluids with one important caveat—she no longer has control. Her damaged body insists on purging itself of her “blood,” her passion, her humanity. And all she can do in response is purse “her lips...more tightly,” a futile attempt to regain autonomy over her body. Here, Flaubert's subconscious fears express themselves quite literally through his perversely vibrant imagery. As with debauchery, he apprehends the relinquishment of self-control more so than the actual passivity. Furthermore, Flaubert's cold, unsympathetic rendering of Emma's suffering suggests an “oral retentive”

personality.² He cannot sufficiently relate to the “expulsive” behavior of “vomit[ing]” because it represents the diametric opposite of his orally-fixative experience. Unable to empathize, he resorts to a contrapasso-like punishment for Emma’s behavior. Therefore, Flaubert proves more consciously frightened of losing his ability to combat his lust for materiality than for harboring the lust itself.

After Emma finally succumbs to death, Flaubert’s gruesome portrayal of her corpse unearths his darkest embryonic terrors. While verbally illustrating the condition of her cadaver, he notes that “the corner of her mouth, which was open, made a sort of black hole in the lower part of her face” (Flaubert 293). Immediately established in his description is Emma’s complete loss of control: she can no longer merely close her mouth. She has lost her dignity. Not only has death removed her ability to move, Flaubert now refers to her not as a person but as a compilation of body parts: a “mouth,” a “face,” etc. And the “black hole” metaphor, symbolizing her cerebral emptiness, reduces those body parts further still to primitive geometric descriptions. Flaubert’s decision to emphasize her hollow psyche using oral imagery illustrates the crux of his control-related fears. He cannot face the unknown, constantly paralyzed by oblivion. This fear presents itself further when, after Emma’s corpse was adjusted to add a wreath, “a stream of black liquid ran out her mouth like vomit” (Flaubert 295). Markedly similar to the previous excerpt, this depiction further employs the color “black” to convey the bleak oblivion of death. However, the sudden action of the “liquid” contrasts the stillness of the previous image, demonstrating the fragility and ephemerality of peaceful oblivion. Therein lies Flaubert’s subconscious influence: his paralyzing fear of nothingness cannot permit enduring stasis. Her post-mortem release of the black bile embodies Flaubert’s subliminal need to subdue his psyche by creating a grotesque vignette of oral behavior. Thus, Flaubert’s subconscious fears and suppressed desires originated from a latent, persistent fear of change.

Flaubert lived a life of order. He maintained a routine and limited his lifestyle to his means. Despite his longings for excess and decadence, he controlled himself. Through *Madame Bovary*, one can better understand how profoundly he valued this control, consciously and subconsciously. Like many before and after him, he feared change—not only around him but also within him. While Emma, who craved wild adventure, was orally under-stimulated by the Freudian model, Flaubert was likely orally over-stimulated. Freud’s summarization of life as “work and love” applies less linearly to Flaubert than the simplicity of his famous quotation might imply: Flaubert’s first erogenous experience influenced his work decades later as an author. His oral fixation subconsciously gave him a life of fear and repressed wants. Unable to satisfy his deepest yearnings, he developed an unhealthy fascination with death, which lives on past his death through the narrative of Emma. Despite his rejection of romantic literature, Flaubert could

² Freud did not affirm the possibility of retentive/expulsive personalities outside of the anal stage of psychosexual development. The application of this identifier to the oral stage reflects the oral fixation subject matter more so than authentic Freudian theory.

be deemed the preeminent dark romanticist. "Work and love," control, and release, life and death: these dualities capture the psyche of Gustave Flaubert.

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