

**FLAUBERT'S MADAME BOVARY
THE ZEN NOVEL**

JOHN P. ANDERSON

Flaubert's Madame Bovary: The Zen Novel

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An Appetizer from Master Flaubert:

“If ever I take an active role in the world, it will be as thinker and demoralizer. I will only tell the truth, but it will be horrible, naked, and cruel.”

“When will things be transcribed from the point of view of a *cosmic joke*, that is to say, as God sees them from on high?”

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Protocol and Debts

Madame Bovary is written in French. Much of its sophistication does not translate. For most of the material I used the English translation by Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Marx's granddaughter, because it was the first one I found online [as part of Project Gutenberg]. In those cases for which more faithful rendition of Flaubert's syntax was important, I used Geoffrey Wall's translation (marked by [Wall]). Material within square brackets [like this] within quoted material is my editorial comment.

For Gustave's family background I used Sartre's *The Family Idiot* and Geoffrey Wall's *Flaubert A Life*. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Sartre are from *The Family Idiot*.

For Schopenhauer, I used the Modern Library edition of *The World as Will and Idea* and Schopenhauer quotes are from that work and edition unless otherwise indicated. P&P refers to Schopenhauer's series of essays entitled *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

The quotes from Flaubert I or II are from his letters, volumes I or II (Steegmuller hardback and paperback editions respectively). Goethe's ideas about colors are from his *Theory of Colours*. The reference to Poulet is to his *Studies in Human Time*. I learned a lot about Flaubert's style from Culler's *Flaubert The uses of uncertainty*.

My ideas about the Romantic movement in the arts were gained from Morris Peckham's *Man's Rage for Chaos* and *Beyond the Tragic Vision*. For the historical Emma, I used Robert Chouard's *Promenades En Normandie avec Madame Bovary et Gustave Flaubert*.

For better or for worse, I know of no one who has interpreted this novel from the point of view of Schopenhauer's Will force. The Will force is the cosmic joke. To live with it you need Zen or its equivalent.

The Zen Novel

Madame Bovary is the Zen novel. It works on the reader in the same way Zen works on a disciple. Both liberate by way of breaking through to a greater reality. With Zen, the liberation leads to a spiritual condition improved by empathy. With Flaubert, it leads to a quantum increase in literary generosity, what literature can give to the reader. Both give more, more of what is important.

Zen, as indicated in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

. . . teaches that the Buddha-nature, or potential to achieve enlightenment, is inherent in everyone, but lies dormant because of ignorance. It is best awakened not by the study of scripture, the practice of good deeds, rites and ceremonies, or worship of images but by a sudden breaking through of the boundaries of common, everyday, logical thought.

In order to achieve a breakthrough beyond common thought boundaries, Zen uses meditation on paradoxical statements such as one hand clapping. Think about one hand clapping for a moment. Two hands clapping suggest applause from others, the report card or in general the power of other. Whose hand would the one hand be? Your own? Your own integrity?

In order to create a literary breakthrough of a similar order, Flaubert uses a radically new style. It is so different that it approaches one hand clapping in terms of strangeness. It is still strange 150 years later. Modern readers still feel the effect of his Zen-like style.

Both Zen meditation and Flaubert's style create initial disorientation in the interest of breaking through conventional preconceptions. Both promote thinking out of

the box. In Flaubert's universe, most clichés, most thought boxes, contain ignorance padded with lack of human empathy.

Thought boxes are featured in this novel. Special interests such as the forces of church, state and the then emerging industrial revolution generate their own propaganda, their own self-enclosed thought boxes that serve their own ends. The reader is sensitized to look for other kinds of boxes by the several actual boxes that are important in the plot; they include a foot prison that denies the flow of healing blood and a three-layered casket for Emma. All the boxes, the thought boxes and the actual boxes, restrict and limit.

If properly nurtured, the initial disorientation produced by Zen and Flaubert's style can graduate to heightened concentration and openness to new possibilities, to new conceptions and different connections, to richer thought out of the box. Both Zen and Flaubert promote seeing more, a fuller sense of reality.

In order to create disorientation, Flaubert denies reader certainty concerning the identity and attitude of the narrator, the traditional pipeline of meaning between writer and reader. For this purpose Flaubert uses shifting narrators and slave narrators, those indentured by attitudes of the characters. The reader wonders who is speaking and from what point of view. These were some of his breakthrough techniques, the counterpart of the disorienting idea of one hand clapping.

In order to create a richer language for literature—new kinds of connections and new possibilities—Flaubert used new ways of creating meaning. They included regular doses of irony, psychologically based syntax, heavy use of certain verb tenses and selective use of metaphors. These new ways allowed the reader to see more and experience more, beyond what literature traditionally

had or could communicate. This is the increase in literary generosity.

These new devices call for additional reader investment and participation in creating understanding. The reader must be active and sensitive. Peckham, who writes about art in the 19th century, said:

. . . [the reader] must break through his orientations; he must raise to consciousness his sensitivity to syntax and he must restructure it. Likewise, he must raise to consciousness his sensitivity to meaning and he must learn to perceive and to respond to new meanings, meanings which put the whole world in a new light Syntactic and semantic self-consciousness and novelty are among the most difficult tasks the mind can undertake. But if the mind can manage to undertake them, the rewards are enormous. For these linguistic structures are the principal carriers of traditional orientations.

Flaubert uses these new techniques to attack traditional reader preconceptions concerning literature and, at a deeper level, preconceptions concerning life. His goal was to destroy clichéd thinking, the special interest sponsored box thinking, and communicate more through this work.

With a fuller sense of reality as the way, the ultimate subject for both Zen and Flaubert is greater freedom. For Zen, freedom is enlightenment. Flaubert's novel shows through the fate of Emma Bovary the dangers of lack of freedom. For those without freedom fate is in charge. Fate is the ultimate box.

The counterpoint of style and plot carries the ultimate music of this novel. The style of the novel is grounded in detachment and freedom whereas the plot is mired in desire,

illusion and determinism. In the plot the demise of Madame Bovary seems inevitable and driven by her passionate nature and vulnerability to illusion. By contrast Flaubert's radical style was built on the philosophy of detachment: "Passion does not make poetry, and the more personal you are, the weaker." The fundamentals for Flaubert are freedom and detachment versus desire and fate. Playing these fundamental themes in counterpoint of style and plot allowed the novel to give a level of aesthetic experience well beyond that given before.

Zen and Flaubert find a principal enemy of human freedom deep in the guts of mankind in the tapeworm of desire. The desire tapeworm feeds on freedom and excretes dissatisfaction. Emma is not free because she has the worm. Emma wants, Emma gets, but she is quickly dissatisfied and then wants more. Her dissatisfaction charts her fateful course. Normally considered the energy for personal choice, desire is in fact just the opposite. Desire is a tar baby, a trap that reduces choices, a trap for freedom. Desire was the ticket out of the Garden of Eden.

The matrix for this novel is the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. His philosophy was nurtured on the doctrines of eastern spirituality, giving it the same inheritance as Zen. Flaubert uses Schopenhauer's concept of the universal Will force to structure the plot and its sense of determinism. In Schopenhauer's system, desire and dissatisfaction are the principal products of the Will. Detachment, Schopenhauer's medicine for fighting off the Will, gives Flaubert's radical new style its robust health.

In 19th century France, special interests such as the church, the state and the capitalist system viewed the world through blinders and promoted their own brand of ethical, social and economic objectives. Their blinders and their objectives are their own special forms of illusion and desire. They create their own boxes and then proceed to fill them.

For Flaubert these special interests share the basic problem Emma has, a fixed orientation that restricts human freedom. Such special interests are at work in this novel.

This novel captivated readers in the 19th century and continues to speak to us even today in the 21st century. Emma Bovary personifies the spirit of the Romantic movement that started to command culture in the early 1800's, a spirit that is still with us in the worship of the individual. She captures the spirit of the age, then and now. Beethoven was the artistic emperor of the Romantic movement. He bent musical genre in his pursuit of the new and personal and Emma bends gender as an aggressive sexual lover. Emma is the Beethoven of the bed.

Gustave Flaubert The Family Idiot

Flaubert knew personally the struggle for freedom, the struggle to develop a sense of self in the face of the influence of others. From the beginning his parents did their very best to co-opt his will and deny him any self esteem as an individual. They were the force of the “other” in his life, “other” as opposed to self. Their denial of his self-realization planted in Gustave the fuel rods for this novel. Like many great works, it is based on the author's own emotional experience.

When Gustave was born his mother wanted a daughter not another son. She wanted a daughter so much that several other male infants born before and after Gustave just happened to die. Gustave's survival must have been a source of disappointment, and he must have intuitively felt maternal neglect and coldness. His mother denied his first chance to create internal meaning through her affection.

His father, son of a veterinarian and grandson of a smith, raised himself in the world by hard work to become a successful doctor. He spent considerable time in scientific

investigation of corpses and believed in scientific determinism—that if we knew enough we could predict all events, just like god. Father Flaubert was a god to his wife, two sons and one daughter. He was controlling, stubborn, inflexible and sharply combative.

When Gustave couldn't learn to read as early as his older brother, his domineering father branded Gustave the family idiot. His older and successful brother Achille was always held up to him as an example. Already sensitive and insecure by reason of his lack of maternal nurturing, Gustave was humiliated to the core by his father.

Father Flaubert decreed that Gustave would not become an actor or a writer, his natural youthful inclinations, and forced him instead to go to law school. He could only pursue something worthy of a Flaubert, not what Gustave himself wanted. This was the Flaubert box. The only applause for Gustave was to be two family hands clapping when he did what they wanted. Gustave heard one hand clapping only as he wrote in secret for ten years.

Gustave's emotional response was a passive buildup of anger and resentment, a cumulative accretion of injuries into one deep wound that festered with unfilled desires and frustrations. Dissatisfaction accrued at usurious rates but found no liquidation. He suffered boils.

Gustave's lack of success at law school and the prospect of confronting his father over failed exams caused Gustave to experience a serious nervous breakdown or epileptic fit [bedridden for several months with relapses over the years]. It came on him as he was riding home with his brother and a light came towards them. Just before losing consciousness he experienced spirals of fire and a huge surge of energy. These details find their place in Emma's experience.

Together with his father's death, the illness gave Gustave emotional release and the opportunity to become a

writer. He could now be the unique Gustave not just another Flaubert. He lived with his mother, never married and had no children. A damaged child himself, he abhorred the idea of becoming a father. His crippled, passive and resentful psyche was badly in need of Zen, and he fashioned a partial, custom cure in detachment in art and withdrawal from life.

His own personal experience drew Flaubert to the character of Emma Bovary, who was based on an actual historical character Delphine Delamare who lived at the same time and in the same area as Flaubert. Flaubert's friends told him about the Delamare case and urged him to write a novel based on it. Gustave was close to the case because his mother and Delphine's were good friends.

The Real Emma Bovary

Delphine Couturier Delamare was born in the provinces (a village near Rouen), was married at age 17 to a student of Flaubert's father, cheated on her husband because of romantic illusions, spent extravagantly without his knowledge and ended up killing herself with poison at age 27 in 1848, just a few years before this novel was started in 1851. Like Gustave's character Charles Bovary, Delphine's husband was not bright, did not qualify to be a full doctor and took the "bastard" position of officer of health in a small village.

Flaubert did base this novel on the Delamare case but changed several important aspects. Some of the changes are noted in the analysis of the text. His version of Delphine Delamare is

Flaubert's Emma Bovary

Me me me. More more more. Shop shop shop. These are the call signs for Emma Bovary, Flaubert's 1857 literary creation.

While created almost 150 years ago, Emma Bovary would be a good poster girl for our own era. Emma is a very modern character indeed. Flaubert claimed Madame Bovary c'est moi (she is I). I claim more. I claim she is we.

Insecure to the core, Emma shops for happiness. Temporary pleasures she has but no permanent satisfactions. She knows her wants but to others she looks for her values. She is bi-polar and anorexic.

Her tragedy is particularly compelling in our credit card and "thin to win" culture. Like Emma, current day consumers shop not so much for goods but in search of happiness. Marx called these fetishes for happiness. Like many female prisoners in the current era, Emma drinks vinegar to stay thin so she is desirable to the opposite sex.

Emma suffers because she never appreciates what she has and always wants what she doesn't have. This is not because of the poor quality of what she has. She is quite well off, both relatively and absolutely. But she is dissatisfied with what she has no matter what she has.

Emma's dissatisfaction can be placated temporarily but only temporarily. She hungers for the buzz a new pleasure gives her. But the buzz dies away quickly. While Emma experiences many pleasures, none leave her with any permanent satisfaction or benefit. Before long she is dissatisfied and restless again. She always wants more. She is addicted to the buzz. She always feels incomplete. Does this sound familiar?

Emma quickly runs out of things that can give her the buzz, and her pursuit of the new becomes more and more frantic. She takes lovers, moves into both sides of S & M and

pursues non-traditional sexual practices. Her reactions to experience become more and more radical; she oscillates bipolar from deep depression to frantic happiness. One bout of depression lasts several months and is quite severe. The last one convinces her to end it all.

Flaubert takes us inside Emma's head and heart, to her very personal and unique why. The reader feels her wants and her buzzes and begins to empathize—Yes, I would feel that way too under those circumstances.

Given the male dominated culture of the time, Flaubert presents her mostly against males—her father, her husband and her lovers. We read nothing about her relations with her mother or the other students at the convent and very little about her interaction with the nuns in the convent.

Emma's fate is a tragedy because she is the ultimate feminist hero. She reaches for something more beyond the life allowed her by 19th century provincial French society controlled and gendered roles. She refuses to accept the limits of any of the roles given to her—as nun, daughter, wife or mother. She wants more than these social boxes offer her, and we admire her refusal to settle for less.

Absent professional opportunities, she finds an outlet in being naughty and indulgent. Only these give her an opportunity to push her person. Pleasure is seemingly the only means of creating her own identity. While we could think of other outlets even in the provinces, she doesn't. Her only sense of identity is in contradiction to social structure and her only source of self is egocentricity and alienation. Flaubert shows that these are dead ends in life. Emma is anti-Zen, which gives identity and value at the moment of insight and empathy.

Her Hollywood screenplay treatment would tout Emma as the woman who gave all to passion and refused to knuckle under to society. Indeed, here is how the DVD

release of the French Claude Chabrol movie based loosely on the novel describes the story:

The beautiful and fiercely sensual Emma Bovary is trapped in a loveless marriage with a small-town physician. Possessed by a burning hunger for life and love, Emma pursues scandalous affairs with passionate abandon. But when her equally reckless spending triggers a financial crisis, she must gain control over her behavior before she completely destroys the lives of those around her.

Notice how hot the temperature is in this come-on: fiercely sensual, burning hunger, scandalous affair and passionate abandon. And for good reason. Many find Emma sexually provocative every time they read the book again.

And as you read this novel, ask yourself why Emma has only one child. Why does she become infertile? There is no hint of contraception. The subject is never discussed. Perhaps Flaubert means to communicate that self-indulgence can dry up the ovaries and lead to a dead end.

Emma Bovary speaks so directly to us that her name has entered our official vocabulary. “Bovarize” means to view oneself with a romantic or other unreal conception. It is a serious form of illusion and can easily lead to tragedy, as it did in her case. Those in illusion are most vulnerable to loss.

Emma, Art of the Romantic Era and Zen

Given her search for the new and her self-conception as a unique person, Emma represents the spirit and the cultural values that took center stage with the Romantic movement. That movement began in the early 1800’s and is still with us at least in part today. She represents the spirit of her age, and she still speaks to us because at least some of

that spirit has passed to us in the worship of the personal—"It is all about me."

The emergence of the Romantic movement was a big deal, a fundamental change in the outlook of humanity. The Encyclopedia Britannica:

Romanticism, sweeping revolt against reason, science, authority and tradition, and order and discipline that convulsed Western civilization . . . [was] manifested in social, political, and moral reforms, but above all in the arts . . . [made] changes of such a profound nature [that romanticism is considered one of the two fundamental poles of art along with classicism]

The permanent heritage of Romanticism is its emphasis on the concepts of individuality, particularity, subjectivity, and self-expression. By accepting the fact that man is an irrational animal, it has enlarged the compass of art to include areas excluded by the harmonious rationalism of Neoclassicism—the dualism of human nature, the death wish along with the affirmation of life . . .

One of the manifestos of Romanticism was Wordsworth's description of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." Flaubert gave us Emma, who listens to her feelings instead of rules. Romanticism emphasized the local—local languages, local beauty, and the local *zeitgeist*. Flaubert gave us this novel with the subtitle "Life in the Provinces" (more about the meaning of this subtitle later) in which the limitation of the provincial is an important ingredient.

Emma's constant desire for the new is mated with Flaubert's radical new style and is still with us in our current

insatiable desire for stylistic dynamism in art, the expectation that each artist must create his or her own totally new style.

As a self alienated from society, Emma was also representative of the peculiar position of the artist at the time, particularly in reactionary France reeling from the excesses of the bloody revolution at the beginning of the century. As the criminal indictment and trial of this novel demonstrated, the state still demanded from its writers support of order and religion. These are the counterpart of the restrictive roles society offered to Emma. These are the boxes the state tried to put Flaubert in.

The essence of the Romantic movement is summarized by Peckham:

Another way of putting it is to say that the Romantics for the first time distinguished the self from the role. The role thus became the mere instrument for realizing the self, as well as the instrument with which society blocked self-realization. . . . How a man could be at once an existent self and a successful role player was the Romantic psychic problem, and still is. . . . If the problem could be solved, it could be done only by breaking through man's current ways of thinking about himself and the world. But the only way to do that was first to expose those ways as illusions. This necessarily involved a profound disorientation
[292]

Emma refuses all the roles and preconceived patterns society and tradition handed to her. She breaks through those ways of thinking and searches for the life that complements her unique self. But she never adjusts her conceptions to reality. She retains a fixed orientation. At the end of her tenure, she is more and more associated with actors, the

epitome of role playing. She is more and more in illusion that reaches its climax in an all night masked ball attended by actors, a dance of masks disguising identity.

The chief value reflected by the Romantic artistic tradition was the uniqueness of the self. Fate mastering Napoleon is its political hero and Beethoven is the ultimate Romantic artist. Beethoven broke the boundaries in music by, for example, using previously church-bound fugues in secular string quartets for the drawing room. Likewise, Emma is a gender bender who takes over the assertive, traditionally masculine role in her marriage, her husband's business and in her sexual affair with Leon. She mounts her last lover Leon. He is on the bottom. That is why I say she is the Beethoven of the bed.

Promotion of the unique self inevitably involves behavior considered inappropriate by the conservatives (formerly known as the bourgeois):

. . . that tradition of the inappropriate is still the motivating behind much of the behavior of Pop artists to-day. The artist is not so interested in shocking the middle classes as he is in displaying behavioral attributes that make it impossible for anyone to categorize him as a member of the middle classes. It is always fun to be rude to the bourgeois, but the Romantic artist's serious interest is in signifying the self and in breaking down those illusory attitudes so popular with the middle classes which keep him from experiencing to the full the disparity between pattern and environmental demand, which prevent him from grasping perceptually more of reality, which deny him the agony and the epiphany of cognitive tension, and a wholly new mode of resolving such tension into cognitive harmony. [Peckham 305]

Here is the connection of the Romantic tradition with Zen, breaking down illusions to achieve a fuller experience of reality. Here is the deep connection of Emma's character as fashioned by Flaubert and the Zen style of this novel. Together they represent the spirit of the age.

By contrast, bourgeois elements typically seek in life to reduce tensions, to achieve maximum psychic and physical comfort, and to increase predictability. This is the AARP program. The bourgeois achieve cognitive harmony through the repetition of clichés as a substitute for clear thinking from scratch. Clichés are thought boxes and eliminate any threat of cognitive tension. These "comfort" interests reappear as the desire for the status quo of the special interests, interests that open and close this novel.

This novel also speaks in terms of social class. The aristocrats, the bourgeois and the peasants parade through the pages. As Peckham summarized, "Their [aristocrats] vocations were farming and fighting; their avocations were love and gambling." The bourgeois thought longer term for economic and personal satisfaction. Business failure not lack of charity was the ultimate shame. Self-satisfaction was their chief personal characteristic. Emma combines the worst of both the aristocrats and bourgeois in her pursuit of immediate gratification and lack of social responsibility.

Both Zen enlightenment and Emma's life experience culminate in emptiness, the psychic experience of being stripped of illusions. For the Zen disciple, this is the way to a stronger and more vital self. For Emma it is a dead end since she has no identity other than by way of illusions. Emma is the opposite of Zen.

Since Flaubert's major values are sincerity, truth and humaneness, the Romantic movement appeared to him as one big excuse for self-indulgence and pride, the substitution of one box for another. That attitude pervades this novel. By

associating with ink the self-administered poison that Emma takes, Flaubert says that the merely alienated and self-indulgent artist is a dead end in art. Starting with Flaubert, James Joyce was to work this idea out in detail (reported in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), that empathy and detachment were the sources necessary for the highest art.

And the Romantic artistic tradition brings us to Schopenhauer, the matrix for this novel:

The seventeenth-century innovators were intensely interested in cognitive tension and problem exposure, in the gap between the pattern and the environmental demand. Nevertheless, that interest was ultimately motivated by a faith . . . that the gap could be closed. . . . But Romantic innovators [19th century] . . . were convinced that the gap could not be closed, ever, that there would always be a disparity between the hypotheses and interests of man and the demands of interacting with the environment, that man's very mode of thinking—his categorical construction of the world—was not derived from the world but from himself. . . . This is why Schopenhauer could say . . . that the way we represent the world to ourselves is determined by our will, our interest, our intentions. [Peckham 291]

That is to say the human experience would always be incomplete, just like Emma's emotional reality.

The Schopenhauer Matrix

Flaubert presents Emma's condition as part of a much larger disturbance, the universal Will force as described by Arthur Schopenhauer.

The Will force is the ultimate buzz that gets in the way of all greater understanding. As the fountain of desire and the big “other” in all of our lives, it is the fundamental enemy of freedom. Schopenhauer’s matrix is the connecting grid that transferred into this novel Flaubert’s formative family experiences of the power of other.

The Matrix Flaubert believed that a successful novel must have a matrix, a central concept from which all the important elements flow:

A good subject for a novel is one that comes all at once, in a single spurt. It is a matrix idea, from which all the others derive [II, 20]

In this case the matrix is the “Will force” as delineated by Arthur Schopenhauer. The Will force structures the plot, particularly its sense of determinism. Schopenhauer’s remedies for the Will sponsor Flaubert’s detached style.

The Pessimists Arthur Schopenhauer was the philosophical pessimist of the first part of the 19th century. He laid the forceful groundwork for Flaubert’s literary pessimism in the second half.

Here is the Encyclopedia Britannica on Schopenhauer:

Arthur Schopenhauer, called “the father of pessimism,” was a discoverer of the irrational impulses of life arising from the will, an opponent . . . of the rationally determined awareness of progress . . . and a pioneer of the new “life” philosophy.

And believe me, this novel is pessimistic. There is no way out for Emma, no exit. Given her character, her fate is determined.

The Will Force Schopenhauer's take on ultimate reality is a force that he called the Will. The Will is a blind striving to exist. It is an independent force that produces all items in the universe, the organic and the inorganic. It leaves its essential nature in its productions. Again the Encyclopedia Britannica:

The will is the thing in itself [not in its appearances]; it is unitary, unfathomable, unchangeable, beyond space and time, without causes and purposes. In the world of appearances, it is reflected in an ascending series of realizations. From the blind impulses in the forces of inorganic nature . . . to the rationally guided actions of men, an enormous chain of restless desires, agitation, and drives stretch forth . . . an eternally aimless and insatiable straining, inseparably united with misery and misfortune. At the end, however, stands death, the great reproof that the will-to-live receives, posing the question to each single person: Have you had enough?

The restless Will is always at variance with itself, always self conflicted, always becoming and in flux. It just goes on and on. It is a blind force and without purpose. It resists death. In this context suicide is a cop out.

The Will produces suffering because its very nature is dissatisfaction. The Will causes pain and suffering because it always wants more. It is never satisfied. Progress cannot placate it.

The Will force buffets Emma with restless desire and insatiable straining. She feels the Will more than most because of her self-indulgent nature, the perfect culture for the Will to prosper and reach full power. Eventually even a young Emma has had enough. She takes poison and her

doctor husband cannot determine the antidote. Her suicide is a cop out.

The Will and the Illusion of Individuality The Will is anti-Zen. It corrupts freedom by weakening sense of self and increasing illusion. It does this while at the same time creating the impression of individuality. It creates this impression through desire—I want therefore I am. In Schopenhauer’s sense of ultimate reality, desire is the external Will speaking through the person and not an individual product of just of that person. The Will is a kind of ventriloquist and the person a puppet.

The Will causes each person to see himself or herself as a separate and unique individual with his or her own special needs and wants. All other beings and objects are viewed as secondary to these egocentric interests. This is the first business of the Will, selfish concern for one’s own person. Now we take this for granted to a remarkable degree. However, for Schopenhauer, this kind of individuality is just one big illusion.

The Schopenhauer reality is that we all exist because of the same force. The big picture is that we are all made by the Will. We are all made of the same stuff, but that stuff wants us to think that we are separate because that attitude is survival positive. Our sense of separateness is an illusion. Very infrequently we can break through the illusion and sense the common substance, such as when instinctively we risk our life to save a stranger. As this case indicates, insight comes with empathy.

The proposition that individuality is illusory is particularly troubling for our 21st century values. We honor indeed worship individuality. But most of what we call individualism is just narcissism—“it’s all about me.” This is Emma’s kind of individuality. The modern cult of individuality is in large part just a justification for our selfish orientation. Indeed, this is the age of the Will. Advertising

spreads its illusion. You too can be sexy. You too can be fashionable. You too can create envy. Just buy our stuff. Or as the serpent said to Eve in the Garden, you too can become god-like. Just bite here.

True individualism is about the unique talents each of us has. It is expressed in what each of us can do, not what we want or desire. Most of us want the same things as Emma, to have exciting sex and new toys. There is no individuality in buying what is hot, the same things everyone else wants, or wearing your hat sideways like everyone else. Desire is a trap not a freedom because in large part it leads to repetitive behavior.

Following Schopenhauer this novel treats desire-based individuality as illusory. For Emma desire and illusion are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Emma thinks she is special and thus should get what she wants. While Emma thinks she pursues a path paved by her superiority and uniqueness, we see that her behavior is a product of a disease we all share. This is why this novel can be particularly troubling to us today.

The Will and Illusion in General Will composes and directs the distinction between subjective experience and objective reality. It creates the illusion of a totally separate subjective, a totally separate “I.” Guided by the Will, our apparently separate take on the world is idea only, that is to say the presentation in our brains of external objects and events. That presentation is filtered through our built-in mental concepts of time, space and causality. Schopenhauer calls this the “world as idea.”

While useful for survival, the concepts hardwired in the human mind are not necessarily aspects of objective reality and can corrupt knowledge of reality by limiting what we experience. These assumptions can also hide additional dimensions. In this sense the world as idea is necessarily the world of appearances, how the world appears to us. The Will