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The Pharmacist and the Holy Man

“For a thing to be interesting,” said Flaubert in one of his letters, “You need only look at it for a long time” (354). One thing that is looked at for quite some time in the *Madame Bovary* is the argument of Homais, the pharmacist of Yonville, and Father Bournisien, the town’s priest. The thread of the debate of these two characters, sometimes comical, sometimes serious, is dragged out all the way to the end of the story. Both these characters are practitioners in their own way: Homais practices medicine, and the Father practices religion, yet neither of them are especially good at what they are trying to practice. Homais, for instance, is not actually allowed to practice medicine in Yonville and has been in trouble with the authorities in the past for doing just that, and Father Bournisien just seems somewhat out of touch with his parish: “When he saw Madame Bovary he said, ‘Excuse me, I didn’t recognize you at first’” (109). In a novel about falsehoods, fake people, and the lies they tell, these two antagonists are the exemplary specimens, running their fakery to the end of the story and ruining the lives of the people around them: specifically Emma Bovary’s. Emma, due to her continual phases of sins and repentances, is continually jettisoned between these two, and the way they treat her contributes to her problems. The Father essentially ignores her when she comes to him for help, and Homais directly contributes to her troubles in numerous ways. And yet the two of them are constantly at odds with each other over whose way of thinking is better. Since both these characters are false practitioners of their ways of thinking in the novel, the reader is eventually shown just how

similar they are. After Emma's death, both of them are described as follows: "They sat opposite each other, their stomachs thrust forward, their faces puffy and scowling, finally united in the same human weakness after so much dissension..." (328). This particularly unflattering description finally shows the reader that despite their arguments, Homais and Father Bournisien are really just two sides of the same coin: both are practitioners of falsehood and both people are what push the story to its end with the untimely death of Emma Bovary.

Flaubert's writing style, indirect and sometimes calculating in its attempts to show the reader what he wants the reader to see, never comes out and says directly that the two men are both the same kind of person. Instead, there are hints and tips toward what Flaubert wants us to see. The reason for this, according to Auerbach, is because "he believes that the truth of the phenomenal world is... revealed in linguistic expression" ("In the Hotel de la Mole" 486). Thus, Flaubert leaves it up to the reader to pick up his hints. One example of this is the way the reader is first introduced to Homais:

But the most eye catching sight of all is across the street from the Lion d'Or inn: Monsieur Homais' pharmacy! At night when his lamp is lit, the colored glass jars which embellish his front window cast their red and green glow on the ground; looking through them, as through Bengal lights, once can see the shadow of the pharmacist leaning over his desk. The front of the shop is covered from top to bottom with signs written in running script, round hand, or block letters... and his name is written on a sign which runs across the entire width of the shop: *Homais, Pharmacist* (69-70).

This description of the shop, gaudy sounding enough as it is, becomes extremely hubristic when the reader realizes that Homais is not actually allowed to practice medicine anywhere. The first

sight we see of Homais is not actually the man himself, but what symbolizes him: his shop. Everything about this shop is eye-catching and loud. In his sense of self importance, Homais invites people to look at him; to see what it is he is doing. One gets the sense that Homais' shop is so gaudy that he never actually has to admit to the fact that he is not at all qualified to practice; instead he merely blinds the simpletons around him by making his shop more of a show than anything else. That is the sight of the shop, but what of the man who owns it? Flaubert describes him: "a slightly pockmarked man wearing green leather slippers and a velvet fez with a gold tassel... His face expressed nothing but self-satisfaction, and he seemed to take life as calmly as the goldfinch..." (71). Our first encounter with the man who will eventually lie his way to the end of the story is not a pleasant one. Homais gives off an air of repugnance that the reader initially picks up on, but can never quite explain until Homais' character is brought more to light.

Father Bournisien, introduced in a similar fashion in this section, walks into the inn where Homais is having a conversation with the innkeeper to find his umbrella he left there earlier. The description is somewhat sparse compared to that of Homais, but at this point, the characteristics of the priest are not as important as the reaction Homais has to him. The priest is offered a drink by the innkeeper, but he refuses. According to Homais, "his refusal to accept a drink struck him as the most odious kind of hypocrisy; all priests were secret guzzlers" (74). From here, Homais launches himself into a tirade to which nobody in particular is listening. When reading this passage, one gets the feeling that the people in the inn who are no longer listening have heard this rant before. In fact, the reader gets the feeling that they have heard it so many times that they don't need to listen to know what Homais is saying. Homais is something of an anti-religious zealot, so all that he is saying or will say about the priest has been said and re-said by him.

Stopping at this section in the novel, the reader could end up feeling that Homais is being entirely unfair to religious leader of Yonville, but that is not entirely the case. As a much more minor character than Homais, the priest gets far less description in the novel, but there is a section that tells the reader quite a bit about the priest's character: he is not as innocent as the section describing Homais makes him out to be. Throughout the novel, Emma Bovary has a few different repentances. On one of these occasions, she goes to the priest to try to talk to him about it. At first the priest doesn't even recognize her, but when he does he asks her how she is. She tells the priest that she isn't well and in fact she is suffering, but the priest hardly seems to notice: "So am I... These first hot days make you feel terribly faint, don't they?" (109). The priest, here, responds to the suffering of someone he is supposed to be spiritually guiding by almost completely ignoring her. As the conversation continues Emma tells him that she doesn't need an earthly remedy for her suffering; She, in other words, needs the spiritual help that he, as a priest, should be there to offer her, but his attentions are on the boys in his church and not on her at all. She eventually gives up on what she came there asking him about. The priest, here, had the perfect opportunity to help her with what was happening, but he could not see that she was actually having any kind of trouble. There is a sense that this story could have potentially ended differently if he had been one of the people to actually help her, but instead he ignores her problems.

Showing even more of the character of the Father Bournisien, this section ends after Emma gives up in her attempts to ask him for help. His parting words to her are: "I'm sorry, but my duty comes first you know: I have to go deal with my boys" (111). As the priest of Yonville, Father Bournisien's duty is to attend to the spiritual needs of everyone in the town. In a great move of Flaubertian irony, the priest is neglecting his duty by emphasizing the different (and,

possibly, easier) duty of teaching. As Emma walks away from this scene, the voices of the Priest's Sunday school echo behind her: "What is a Christian? A person who having been baptized... baptized... baptized..." (112). Baptism is supposed to be the outward symbol of an inward faith, but by reducing it to nothing more than the symbol, a statement is being made about the faith of the priest in Yonville. He carries with him all the outward trappings of a holy man, but he seriously fails to do his job when someone comes to him for help. These closing words echo in the ears of Emma as a taunt of a help she will never get since no one is there who will help her.

Shortly after this scene comes the effect of the priest's neglectfulness: Emma meets Rodolphe. Their torrid affair begins as soon as Rodolphe shows up, filling the space that was left by Leon who has gone away to live in Paris. Emma has, of course, been looking to find someone other than Charles for some time before this. She comes very close to finding it in Leon, and the two only barely avoided an affair when he left. Had she been helped by the priest and then Leon had left, there is some possibility that everything that happened with Rodolphe could not have happened, but the story does not give us this grace. Instead, Rodolphe and Emma meet, and it is not long before she is sneaking out of her house, away from her husband, and to Rodolphe. Their affair, quickly going from bad to worse, ends somewhat suddenly (although only briefly) with a letter from her father. A memory in her is sparked by her father's letter, and she begins to think of her life as a girl living on the small farm her father owned:

She remembered summer afternoons full of sunshine. The colts whinnied whenever anyone came near them, and they galloped and galloped... There had been a beehive beneath her window, and sometimes the bees, buzzing around in the sunlight, would strike against the panes... What happiness there had been in

those days! What freedom! What hope!... She had none left now. Each new venture had cost her some of them... (168).

For the first time since her introduction in the very beginning of the story, Emma has a moment of genuineness. She recalls the simpler life she led, and she acknowledges that she has lost something of it with her extramarital affair. She continues to see Rodolphe, but he finds her “more serious” than she normally is (169). Eventually, the thoughts she is having leads her to the second of her repentances. “She even wondered why she detested Charles, and whether it might not be better if she could love him” (169). At first she has no idea how to love him because there is so little she can actually bring herself to love about her husband, but then Homais gives her an idea which becomes the part where this small glimmer of hope is extinguished, plunging the rest of the story into the darkness that results in Emma’s suicide. This idea comes completely from Homais.

Having recently read an article on a new method of curing clubfoot, Homais has decided he is the expert on this condition. In this scene in the book Homais decides “that too keep up with the times, Yonville ought to be the seat of operations for talipes, commonly known as clubfoot” (169). The town has one person with this condition: Hyppolite, and one person who is allowed to operate: Charles. Much like the devil going for Eve, Homais attempts to coerce Emma into convincing Charles to carry out the operation: “What’s there to lose? And look at what’s to be gained!” (170). She is charmed by words such as “success” and “fame”, and her mind quickly gravitates from that to the word “fortune” (for her husband, of course). Meanwhile, Homais has his own interests in mind: as someone who also fancies himself something of a writer, Homais has already planned an article that he will be sending to the paper with his name attached. This becomes Homais’ easiest sell. After her rampant affair with Rodolphe, Emma is

looking for “something more solid than love to lean on” (170), and she is hoping to find that in the fame that Charles may be able to get from this operation. Homais is always looking to find ways to promote his own interests, and this scene is no different: fame for Yonville means more business for him; more business for him means he can send his own name out farther. Yet the opposite is easy to see as well: if the operation doesn’t go well, then he is not the one doing the operation. He can ride the coattails of fame if the operation works; he can abandon ship if it fails.

Not surprisingly, the operation fails. As a country doctor who really only has a certificate allowing him to practice and not a degree, Charles is more used to setting bones after breaks and doing the occasional leeching. He really isn’t qualified for this type of operation. The cut made for the operation on Hyppolite’s leg becomes gangrenous, and they eventually have to remove his leg entirely. Both the pharmacist and the priest are present while Hyppolite’s leg is getting worse and worse, and neither of them help in particular. Father Bournisien advises saying a few prayers just as a precautionary measure, and Homais’ medicines do nothing to hinder the gangrene. The comparison here is obvious. Neither the false priest, nor the false medicine man can truly help the man who is dying in front of them.

After this scene, Emma’s hatred for Charles comes back with renewed strength, and she goes back to Rodolphe: the two begin their affair anew; however, the wilder she gets, the less Rodolphe wants to stay, and he eventually leaves her for good whereupon she tries to throw herself out of a window. After this, she has her third repentance in the story: “Her soul... was at last resting in Christian humility” (210). Emma throws herself into such a religious fervor that it even begins to concern Father Bournisien himself: “He felt that her piety, by its very fervor, might eventually border on heresy or madness” (210). The scene involving Hyppolite was largely dominated by Homais, and that having failed, Emma is driven back to Rodolphe. Now

with Rodolphe out of the story, her return to faith is dominated by the faulty Father. Yet he is not excited by her religious fervor; he is frightened by it and thinks she is losing her mind. Again, this is not the kind of thing one would expect from someone who is the spiritual leader of a small town.

While she is under the care of the priest, the next significant event happens in the story: the opera. On the pharmacist's suggestion, and without the priest's minding it, Charles takes Emma to an Opera where she is reunited with someone she has seen before, but was largely left out of the story until now: Leon. The two meet at the opera, but they really reconnect with each other in the setting of a cathedral; Emma's choice of location hoping that the sacred ground would keep her from any temptation. It doesn't. Her religious fervor under the guidance of Father Bournisien proves to be just as unhelpful as her attempt to push Charles into operating on Hyppolite. Though Emma's following affair with Leon is not directly the fault of the priest, he did encourage her to go to the opera when some priests would not. Had he attempted to discourage her from this, she probably would never have met Leon again. In some cases, these slight miscalculations on the part of one of these two practitioners are what have huge and lasting effects on the rest of the story. One such miscalculation on the part of Homais is his mention of the jar of arsenic in front of Emma. Between these two seemingly small events, the end of the story is effectively brought about. Had father Bournisien not allowed her to go to the opera, she would never have run into Leon; had Homais not mentioned the arsenic in front of Emma, she would never have known it was there and she wouldn't have used it to take her own life.

Yet meet Leon she did, and discover the arsenic she did as well both of which contributed to her demise. Her relationship to Leon gone bad, and her debts piling higher and higher around her, Emma eventually takes the easy way out, eats the arsenic and "[ceases] to exist" (321). The

two antagonists in the story carry their argument all through the story; their interactions are played off one another until the end. With his “almost cinematographic” writing style, Flaubert is continually juxtaposing scenes about Homais with scenes about the priest thereby creating a feeling of their opposition for the reader (Levin, “The Cathedral and the Hospital” 403).

However, in a revealing scene at the end of the book, Flaubert shows us that the two antagonists are the same. After Emma’s death, the two men have been up with the body arguing their views as usual. It is here that Flaubert gives us his best description of them: “They sat opposite each other their stomachs thrust forward, their faces puffy and scowling, finally united in the same human weakness after so much dissension” (328). As for the weakness in which they are united, it is their common failure to help Emma. Harry Levin in “The Cathedral and the Hospital” sums it up as follows: “Since religion is served by the priest as inadequately as science is by the pharmacist, it is not surprising that neither force has operated benignly on Emma’s existence” (417). Both these men, with both their false practices, are in some way at fault for the death of Emma Bovary. Both try to help: the father brings his holy water, the pharmacist his chlorine, but neither of their liquids are enough to wash away their own lies and falsehoods. Had the priest actually practiced his beliefs and paid attention when Emma needed help, then she could have found the help she needed. Had Homais not acted like he knew everything there was to know about healing clubfoot, then the botched operation on Hyppolite would never have happened. Despite the seeming differences of the views of these two men, their weakness, and the weaknesses of all the other characters in the book is how false they are. Both their practices act as though they are ultimate realities for truth and salvation, but in the end of the story, neither of them succeeds, and, in fact, they are actually very much the same.

Either Homais or the priest lie either at the center or just to the side of every major conflict that happens in the story, and all of their interactions, when taken together, ultimately lead to Emma's untimely death. A helpful way to show just how central these characters are is by the following diagram:

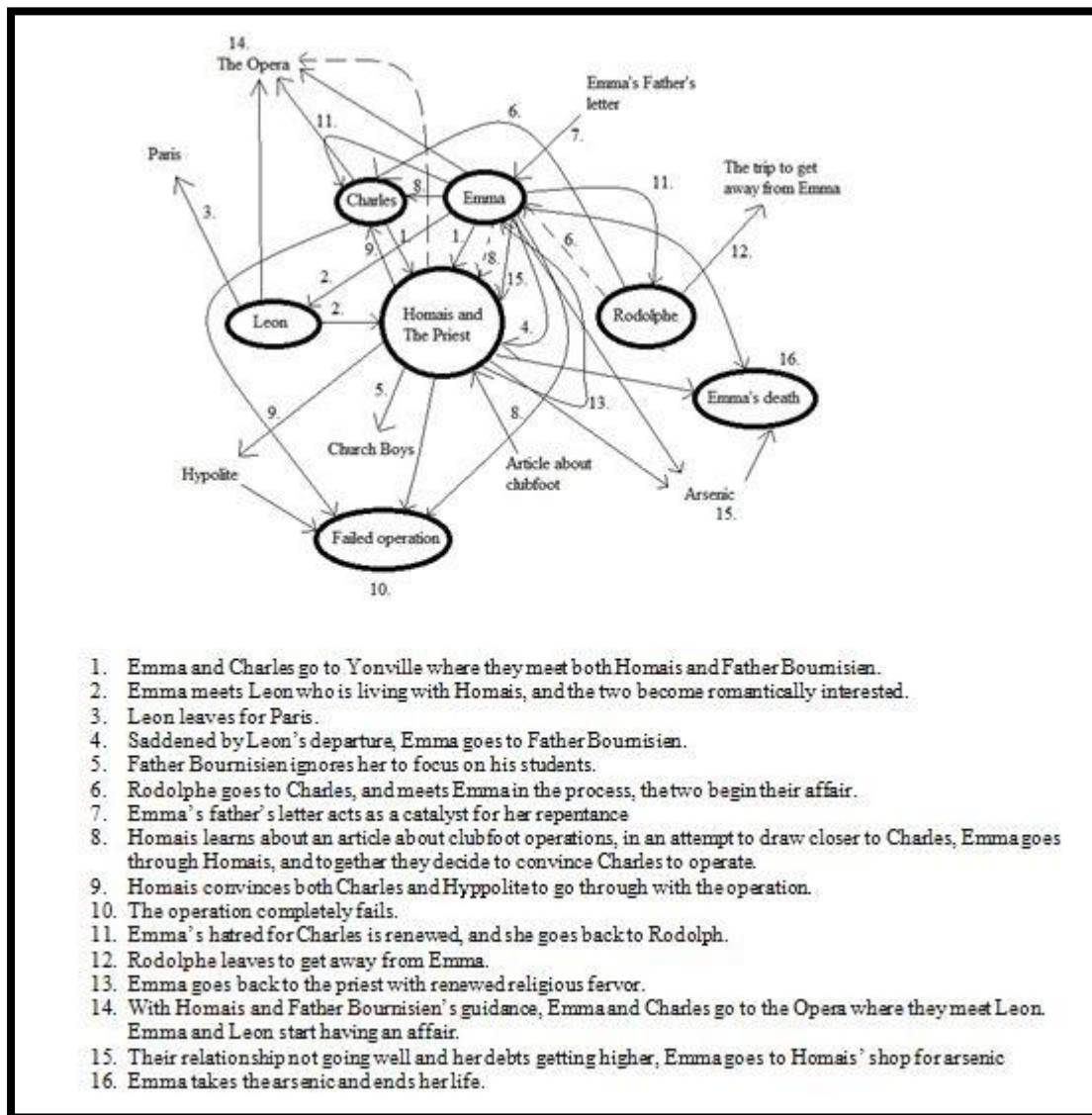


Figure 1: Map of Homais and the priest's influence in the book

As this diagram shows, every significant event is in some way influenced by either Homais or the priest in some negative way. Though a diagram like this is not of immediate importance to

the story, it is helpful to see the way Homais and Father Bournisien contribute in a negative way to the story. The reason the two men are so central to the story is that they are essentially the same kind of person. The reason their influence is always negative is because they are both representative of the perversions that can happen when things like religion and science, both of which have historically been seen as sources of truth, are only practiced by liars and fake people. This is why, after Emma's wake, the priest can clap the pharmacist on the back and say the words "We'll manage to get along with each other yet!" (329). These words, harmless on the surface, are actually filled with implications in the story. The two men actually can get along quite well with each other. In their common and united failure, they can manage to see eye to eye. Flaubert artfully draws their fight to a close with these words and provides his full commentary on these two. First, they are shown to be one and the same type of person, and then they are able to get along. Given the fact that their argument runs all the way through the story, this could be a surprise to some readers, but their alternating viewpoints get so much recognition so that Flaubert can show the reader that their fight is actually pointless because neither of them are doing what they are actually supposed to do with their beliefs. Because of this, the only effect that they can have on the story is a negative one.

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