

SECOND PAPER (Due Date: Lecture #18)

Papers should consist of approximately seven pages (figure 320 words/page). I add that choice of large type, triple-spacing, and huge margins are to no avail; word-count is what matters. PLEASE NUMBER THE PAGES; it will help me in writing my comments. If the numbers swallow up space beyond the usual one-inch margins, keep the word-count in mind.

I repeat my introductory remarks to the first assignment:

The following topics are meant to be suggestive--the starting-point for thinking through an essay. Please remember that you are not writing a book-report but an essay, which must have an argument, a point to make about the book(s) covered. In consequence of observing this distinction, it follows that you should not give an outline of the plot or descriptions of incidents and characters unless (a) they are directly relevant to a point that you are making about the book and (b) you are reminding your reader of the evidence that they supply. In other words, you should assume that the reader of your essay has read the book and already knows what is in it. Finally, the point of your argument should not be so obvious that no argument against it can be imagined; you shouldn't be arguing a thesis for which no sensible alternative exists.

To elaborate slightly: (1) An essay has a thesis (e.g., the "real" hero of Père Goriot is Vautrin); (2) your choice of thesis implies a puzzle that you are resolving (e.g., the title of the book suggests that Goriot is the protagonist of the book); (3) your thesis should have in mind the possibility of some alternative view of the matter (Rastignac is the hero) which is sensible.

These introductory remarks are not meant to provide you with the form of an outline for an essay but with the background assumptions that will keep your essay from sounding like a ramble among unassimilated details or a rehearsal of the obvious (or what is worst of all, a sermon: e.g., Vautrin is a bad person and we should all dislike him). You are making a case for a view (an interpretation) of a text.

Suggested Themes and Topics

We have discussed the notion that characters in a text are defined in some manner relative to the world that the text presents and to the problems that circumstances within this world may pose for characters within it. In this connection, we asked whether certain characters were superior, equal or inferior to other characters in the text or (more importantly) to the implied reader of the text in respect of certain qualities. Discuss any aspect of the issue of ranking characters with respect to qualities by centering discussion on any one or two of the characters from either The Red and the Black or Madame Bovary.

To elaborate: Characters in novels cannot be immediately related to readers in point of some notion of potential for acting in an admirable way (admirable in any sense, not just in an ethical sense). The reader cannot always say, "How inferior--I'm more clever or more honest or more brave than that!" The introductory paragraphs of Père Goriot might be taken as warning the reader not to assume his or her superiority to the characters. The implication here is that the reader either doesn't know as much as the author about the depths of life or else is already too jaded by the pressures of success to appreciate these depths. The novel, however, knows better and the reader should not suppose that the reader is entitled to believe himself or herself superior

to one character because he is a fool with regard to his children or to another because he learns to get the better of his conscience.

Turn this issue upon Emma Bovary. She has been described as a trivial person—the equivalent of a housewife in the hinterlands of rural America who stuffs her imagination with television dramas and runs away to the big city to realize her fantasies about love and romance. Is this account adequate to her presence in the novel?

Characters in books do not (usually) compare themselves or others in point of superiority, equality or inferiority with the readers, but they do compare themselves with each other. Examine any character from either The Red and the Black or Madame Bovary in respect of the judgments they make in this regard and draw some conclusions about the view that the text takes of them as they judge others.

A complex version of this issue: In some ways, Emma, provincial housewife that she is, shares some features with Mathilde de la Mole. Meanwhile, Mathilde shares some features with Julien. (One that we did not note in class: in her first sexual experience, she is conscious of doing her duty [p. 344.] and therefore does not enjoy the experience.) Comment on either of these comparisons in ways relevant to the themes of one or both novels.

At one point the novel says that Emma “was incapable of . . . recognizing anything that wasn't expressed in conventional terms” (p. 51.) and of Rodolphe, much later in the novel (p. 224) that he can't recognize the uniqueness or genuineness of feeling that might underlie conventional similarities of expression. Does this make them alike or different?

Emma in her affair with Rodolphe is controlled by him; he is the dominant figure, to the point where “he made her into something compliant, something corrupt. (p. 224.) Leon in his affair with Emma is controlled by her; she is the dominant and rather frightening figure. Are these relations transitive? that is to ask, is Emma placed between the two men in point of strength of character?

Minor characters in The Red and the Black (Julien's father, M. Valenod, the Abbe de Frilair) or in Madame Bovary (Homais, for example, or even Charles, who is supremely happy with Emma), know what they want and how to get it. Does this make them superior to the main characters (Julien, Emma)?

Stendhal writes of Julien at one point in the book (p. 327): "He was the unhappy man at war with all society." What is meant by this phrase? At the end of Pere Goriot, Eugene would seem to declare war on society--the high society in Paris. Compare the two in respect of this notion. An important feature of the comparison: Julien is so sensitive to insult that he sees it where it doesn't exist and is willing to risk his career, such as it is, in answering a provocation (he wants to fight a duel with Amanda Binet's lover just before entering the seminary, risking his seminary career; he decides to seduce Mathilde, imperiling his career as the Marquis's secretary). Would Eugene do such things? Eugene worries about his conscience. Does Julien?

Discuss role-playing in any manner that seems important to understanding The Red and the Black. In this context, pay particular attention to the notion of hypocrisy and to the goings-on in the chapter entitled "An attack of gout".

Discuss the notion of boredom and its central role in either The Red and the Black or Madame Bovary.

The notion of "duty" to one's career is central to The Red and the Black in a way that it is not to Pere Goriot or to Madame Bovary. There is, perhaps, an arguable connection with Don Quixote. Discuss.

Three versions of one topic: (1.) Emma Bovary has been called "The Female Quixote." Discuss. (2.) Compare Julien Sorel or Emma Bovary with Don Quixote, as a character who gets an idea of "what is owing to oneself" from books. (3.) Don Quixote speaks of "imitation"--imitating idealized examples of conduct found in important narratives (whether historical or fictional) or imitating the best works of literature by writing works similar in kind. Neglecting the latter, we still speak of the former, but we use the term "role-model". Discuss the function of role-models in either R&B or MB.

"Deep down, all the while, she was waiting for something to happen. . . . Other people's lives, drab though they might be, held at least the possibility of an event. One unexpected happening often set in motion a whole chain of change: the entire setting of one's life could be transformed. But to her nothing happened." (Madame Bovary, pp 72-3.) It has been said that Emma Bovary would not enjoy reading a book like Madame Bovary for Madame Bovary is a book in which, for great stretches of prose, nothing happens. (Indeed, Emma tells Leon that she prefers exciting, event-packed romantic novels to poetry.) Comment.

Take any passage from The Red and the Black or Madame Bovary and analyze it, showing how its issues and themes are characteristic of the book as a whole.

At the end of The Red and the Black, Julien is happy in prison (where ambition has no place), disregards Mathilde (who has sacrificed everything for him and is soon to bear his child), and occupies himself by making love with Mme de Renal and preparing himself to meet the day of his execution. Is this an appropriate end to the book?

Compare Julien's two love-affairs in any way that bears upon what you take to be the concerns or main themes of the text. Compare his two love-partners. Alternatively, discuss the differences between Charles, Rodolphe, Leon, all of whom Flaubert, in his private correspondence, called "mediocrities" and worried about how well he would enable the reader to distinguish them.

Throughout The Red and the Black, we often know more than Julien, who repeatedly misunderstands what is going on around him. Does this detract from his stature as the hero of the book (assuming that the book has a hero)?

Emma has three lovers in her life—Charles, Leon, Rodolphe. Compare and contrast them. Is there any development in her passage from Charles to Rodolphe to Leon or is it just movement and repetition—from expectation to disappointment.

"I was improvising for the first time in my life", says Julien of his speech to the Besancon jury. What is the significance of this observation in relation to Julien's sense of his career, his importance, his duty? The Abbe de Frilair regards Julien's speech as a form of suicide. Is he right?