

**AN ANTI-HERO'S DESIRE FOR OBJECTS: GUSTAVE
FLAUBERT'S *L'ÉDUCATION SENTIMENTALE****

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century French novelist Gustave Flaubert contributed significantly to the development of the novel genre. Even though his name is associated with *Madame Bovary*, his novel *L'Éducation sentimentale* (Sentimental Education) stands out with its deviation from the traditional novel. Despite at first sight appearing to be a *Bildungsroman*, its protagonist neither learns from his mistakes, nor changes in a positive way. Whereas traditional novelists such as Balzac place emphasis on the depth and development of characters Flaubert does the opposite, presenting an anti-hero to the reader whilst giving character depth a secondary role in the novel. Instead, he prefers to make object names and descriptions which are secondary in the traditional novel more explicit and visible. In that aspect, it is possible to argue that *L'Éducation sentimentale* brings a substantial innovation to the novel genre. This study first introduces the anti-hero Frédéric Moreau, and then discusses how the novel treats objects and what their function is throughout the novel.

Keywords: Anti-Hero, Descriptions Of Objects, *L'Éducation Sentimentale*

**BİR KARŞIT-KAHRAMANIN NESNELERE OLAN TUTKUSU:
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'İN *DUYGUSAL EĞİTİM* ADLI ROMANI**

ÖZET

On dokuzuncu yüzyıl Fransız roman yazarlarından Gustave Flaubert'in roman türünün gelişimine önemli katkıları olmuştur. İsmi her ne kadar *Madam Bovary* romanıyla özdeşleşmiş olsa da *Duygusal Eğitim* adlı romanı geleneksel romandan sapmasıyla dikkat çeker. *Duygusal Eğitim* ilk bakışta *Bildungsroman* yani karakterin geçmişten günümüze gelişimini konu edinen bir anlatı gibi dursa da başkarakter ne hatalarından ders alır, ne de olumlu yönde bir değişim gösterir. Balzac gibi geleneksel roman yazarları karakterin derinliğine ve gelişimine oldukça ağırlık verirken Flaubert bunun tersini yaparak *Duygusal Eğitim*'de okuyucuya bir karşıt-kahraman sunar ve karakter derinliğini ikinci plana atar. Bunun yerine geleneksel romanlarda ikincil konumda bulunan nesne isimleri ve tasvirlerini daha belirgin ve görünür kılmayı tercih eder. Bu bakımdan *Duygusal Eğitim*'in roman türüne önemli bir yenilik getirdiğini öne sürebiliriz. Bu çalışmada öncelikle karşıt-kahraman Frédéric Moreau'yu tanıtip sonrasında roman boyunca nesnelere nasıl

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vurgu yapıldığı ve bu nesne tasvirlerinin ne gibi işlevleri olduğu üzerinde durulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karşıt-Kahraman, Nesne Tasvirleri, *Duygusal Eğitim*

INTRODUCTION

Following its publication, Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869) received unfavourable reviews and was overshadowed by *Madame Bovary*. As David Roe (1989) states, "Whereas modern critics may associate the text with nihilism, early critics complained about the portrayal of mediocrity, meaninglessness and recurring failure in the novel, contrasting it negatively with Balzac's or Stendhal's novels which usually trace the education of an ambitious, skilful hero whose interaction with the world ends productively; thus the reader enjoys a powerful plot that creates high tension" (83). Nevertheless, *L'Éducation sentimentale* has gained greater recognition in time and is now frequently cited as one of the most important examples of the nineteenth-century novel. I argue that the objects that appear in the novel are at least as significant as characters in the novel including the main character Frédéric Moreau, who is an anti-hero with no outstanding traits and no proper development. The first part of this study concentrates on introducing the protagonist of the novel and his so-called love for Madame Arnoux. The latter part focuses on the descriptions and different functions of the objects are arguably more foregrounded than characterisation in the novel. In doing so, this paper employs a close reading method, zooming in on the text and supporting the argument with examples from the novel as well as theoretically by referring to the works of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jonathan D. Culler.

Frédéric Moreau as an Anti-hero in *L'Éducation Sentimentale*

Having grown up in the provinces in a middle-class family, Frédéric Moreau aspires to be a Parisian and live with his close friend Deslauriers and do nothing, if possible, except for living elegantly in artistic circles and pretending to be an aristocrat in high society. As William Paulson (1992) argues: "He is an anti-hero: passive, indecisive, feckless, and yet never evil" (34-5). Almost the only stable thing in Frédéric's life is his love for Madame Arnoux, the wife of his friend Monsieur Arnoux. Her inaccessibility is the only reason why the fickle Frédéric pursues her, although he has experienced other amours. Being of a passionate and artistic nature, he is fond of romance and, from the beginning of the novel, it seems as though he plans to experience the kind of romantic love which involves a great deal of suffering – hence he chooses a woman who is already married. In the scene in which Frédéric gazes wistfully at the meadow from the boat on which he

first encounters Madame Arnoux, a symbolic interpretation is possible according to Corrada Biazzo Curry (1997), “as an analogue of the young man’s feelings and dreams of love, and it introduces the protagonist’s languid [r]omanticism” (130). Growing up comfortably in the provinces, Frédéric appears to have plenty of time for daydreaming and reading romantic literature. But though he exhibits some artistic inclinations, he is a dilettante who does not display the devotion and stability necessary to achieve his ambitions. As Pierre Bourdieu (1996) argues, Frédéric constantly changes his mind, one day producing some ideas about a plot of play or some themes for painting, and another day dreaming of composing verses, and writing a novel entitled *Sylvio, a Fisherman’s Son*, whose major characters are himself and Madame Arnoux. Later, he composes German waltzes and then decides to paint so that he can spend more time with Madame Arnoux and when he loses her, he begins a writing career, writing about the history of the Renaissance (4-5). Frédéric first notices Madame Arnoux’s gaze: “he could not see anybody else in the dazzling light which her eyes cast upon him” (Flaubert, 2004, 10). For Frédéric, Madame Arnoux is the ultimate expression of the feminine with her beauty, grace and virtue. She is the divine goddess, a Virgin Mary, as her first name, Marie, implies. To feel such a sublime love ennobles Frédéric in his own eyes. According to Paulson, for Frédéric, Madame Arnoux is like the heroines of the novels he has read, and loving her enables him to be a noble and sensitive hero (Paulson, 1992, 38). When Deslauriers succeeds in pursuing an ordinary girl walking on the street and takes her home, the anti-hero turns his nose up at his choice: “As if I didn’t have one of my own, a hundred times rarer, nobler, stronger!” (Paulson, 1992, 78). Frédéric worships Madame Arnoux at a distance and spends almost half his fortune to help her when her husband goes bankrupt.

When Monsieur de Cisy, his aristocratic friend, insults Madame Arnoux, Frédéric is ready to fight a duel, thus making Frédéric’s emulation of romances explicit. However, when Madame Arnoux visits him at the end of the novel and indicates that she is eager to be with him, he feels a “repulsion, and something like the dread of incest” and “the fear of feeling disgust later” (Paulson, 1992, 415). The Madame Arnoux that he loves is merely an idea for him. Prendergast notes that:

Madame Arnoux is thus never ‘there’, as an immediate, fully present object of desire, because within the dialectic of desire she is herself a substitute; she is the image of what is already an image (‘un visage de femme’), a face which belongs to no-one, whose origins are essentially literary, and whose

*appearance in Frédéric's consciousness
long precedes the arrival of Madame
Arnoux on the scene of his life.
(Prendergast, 1986, 197)*

Consequently, when she decides to be his mistress he notices all her “imperfections”, such as her white hair, and Frédéric’s love comes to an abrupt end. Therefore, it would be wrong to claim that Frédéric is a passionate lover. He is a dreamer from the beginning of the novel and does not seem to make a great deal of progress in his sentimental education. This is why he can tell Deslauriers diffidently at the end of the novel that Monsieur Arnoux has passed away and that Madame is single, living with her son. He decides that his best years were his high school days when he and Deslauriers went to a brothel before moving to Paris, but not the years that he dreamed of Madame Arnoux. Frédéric’s impatient, inconstant, capricious personality or stupidity is the main obstacle to his becoming a genuine lover and achieving success in life.

The Significance of Objects in *L'Éducation Sentimentale*

Although the main character of *L'Éducation sentimentale* is Frédéric Moreau and events always revolve around him, any attempt to interpret the text in a traditional way by placing him at the centre of the novel and searching for psychological profundity will prove unsatisfactory. Then, the reader is left alone with questions such as the meaning of Frédéric’s feelings towards Madame Arnoux which cannot be answered in this way (Culler, 1986, 231-2).

It is even possible to argue that the descriptions of objects are more revealing than the depth of characterization. Particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, in novels by writers like Flaubert the appearance of “bibelots” or “objets d’art” multiplied. This was no coincidence; in the nineteenth century the concept of “bibelot” acquired a new meaning: whereas previously it had meant almost valueless household items or knickknacks, art-dealers and collectors now began to assign aesthetic value to these material objects, and different kinds of interiors, including the houses of the bourgeoisie, courtesans or arty bachelors, were filled with them (Watson, 1999, 5-6). Thus, their existence in a text may evoke femininity, family, sexuality or male dominance in domestic life. (Watson, 1999, 71-6). In *L'Éducation sentimentale*, an object of art may symbolize respectively virtuous femininity and family life in Madame Arnoux’s house, sexuality and desire for social mobility in Rosanette’s house (Monsieur Arnoux’s mistress), and a bachelor space which designates both elitism and conspicuous consumption in Frédéric’s house.

The many possible interpretations of art objects provide a multi-layered texture which enriches the novel. Thanks to developments in technology and the prosperity of the newly rich middle class, the consumption of commercial goods including art objects increased in general in the nineteenth century. Paintings of high artistic value started to be replaced by small, portable ornaments. Buying and selling these objects was easier than trading in the bigger tableaux. *L'Éducation sentimentale* reflects on this novelty: either fancy household items such as the jewel box move from Arnoux's house to Rosanette's or Rosanette disposes of her old art objects in order to possess new ones. This mobility and dynamism of objects in the novel reflects growing capitalism and early consumer society. Janell Watson (1999) notes that "With every change of fortune, Frédéric buys new clothing and furnishing" and even in the midst of political chaos, riots, and revolutions, Frédéric does not stop shopping (52). Watson (1999) also argues that "he is one of the most ardent consumers in French literature" (53). His shopping signals his addictive nature: he channels his unfulfilled desires into objects he can easily possess.

The narrative focuses on objects from the very beginning of the novel, when Frédéric visits Monsieur Arnoux's store, "Art Industriel", for the first time. The store looks like a bourgeois home with its chandeliers, chests full of porcelain and big glossy paintings, but it is also an art institution where Parisian artists meet and which produces an art magazine as well. As the oxymoronic name suggests, "Art Industriel" is a hybrid structure in which art and business come together. With its reference to commodified art, the store gives the reader particular clues about the nineteenth century middle class and its relation to art. Thus, being indecisive and arty, Frédéric unsurprisingly finds this hybrid attractive (Bourdieu, 1996, 7-8). While returning to his hometown Nogent from Paris, he daydreams about a future career in art where he will paint or write dramas. Immediately afterwards, an interesting and charming man who has a small audience gathered around him draws his attention: Monsieur Arnoux. Enchanted, Frédéric starts to follow him on the boat: "Then, probably because he [Arnoux] was bored with the company, he moved away. Frédéric followed him" (Flaubert, 2004, 6-7). Being interesting, wealthy, and having authority in the art world and leading a tasteful and aesthetic life, Arnoux is everything Frédéric desires to be. It looks as though he has finally found the mediator of his desires. In a metaphorical sense, Frédéric follows Arnoux throughout the novel. First, he leaves the provinces and moves to Paris, finds Arnoux's store and manages to join Arnoux's arty circle, decreasing the distance between himself and his rival, in a process which René Girard (1976) calls "internal mediation" where the admirer tries to satisfy his desires through another person who is in his or her milieu. He becomes a

“vaniteux”, who “will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires” (Girard, 1976, 7-9). For that reason, the objects in Arnoux’s store bring him closer to his desires. His romantic relationships with Madame Arnoux and Rosanette can be interpreted in this context. Everything Arnoux is related to – the people in his life, or the objects surrounding him – is desirable for Frédéric although he is not fully aware of it; “the romantic vaniteux always wants to convince himself that his desire is written into the nature of things” (Girard, 1976, 15). Arnoux appears not to be conscious of Frédéric’s fondness for him and describes the virtues of his wife and even the beauty of his wife’s body which makes Frédéric uncomfortable and jealous: “he began singing her praises: She was kind, devoted, intelligent, virtuous, and expounding her physical attributes” (Flaubert, 2004, 187).

Having succeeded in making friends with Arnoux, and being invited to the house of his ‘mediator’, Frédéric is highly impressed by all kinds of objects which constitute his rival’s world, such as the Chinese-style entrance, satin covered walls and his daughter’s fluffy dress. The reader senses that these objects are as significant as the characters in Monsieur Arnoux’s orbit, such as Pellerin or Madame Arnoux. A doll left on the sofa, and ivory knitting needles are crucial for Frédéric as they are the signs of Arnoux’s domestic happiness. The artistic milieu, the food, everything about the dinner party pleases Frédéric. The dining table is described in detail; ten different kinds of mustard, exquisite wine, they are all parts of the whole he desires.

Frédéric admires Madame Arnoux in a similar way. Everything that belongs to her is special. Frédéric is in love with her possessions such as her jewellery, gloves, and combs, maybe more so than her physical and personal traits: “[They] were things of real significance to him, as important as works of art, endowed with life almost human; they all possessed his heart and fed his passion” (Flaubert, 2004, 63), “His capacity to convert his passion into desire for objects has no limits” (Paulson, 1992, 42). To compare these kitsch belongings of a nouveau riche wife with unique art works is almost comical and the narrative voice ironically criticises Frédéric’s illusions. However, depicting these objects as being as alive as their owners is not a coincidence; on the contrary, it underlines their vitality both for the protagonist and for the novel as a whole. Additionally, Madame Arnoux’s belongings do not stand still but move from one place to another like characters. Her bibelots, especially her jewel box, visit different interior spaces. Because he associates these items with Madame, Frédéric is disappointed to find the box in Rosanette’s house (Curry, 1997, 147).

Frédéric's real intention is to encounter Madame Arnoux when he plans to visit Monsieur Arnoux in the pottery factory that he has founded after the failure of his art and business composite, "Art Industriel"; there Monsieur Arnoux has cut down on the artistic aspect of his career and is concentrating more on straightforward commercial business. During his visit, Frédéric asks Madame Arnoux's permission to keep some of the pottery clay which results in a condescending reply: "Heavens, what a child you are!" (Flaubert, 2004, 212). It is evident that the protagonist establishes a bond between objects and his emotions, associating them with the concepts of love and possessing. It can be interpreted as a self-defence mechanism in which the subject is prone to keep the object which reminds him of his desire so that he can soothe the pain of the absence of the object of desire by finding solace in substitutes. Interestingly, when Madame Arnoux finally decides to reciprocate his love, she uses the language of objects and gives him some of her belongings; first her gloves and a week later, her handkerchief (Flaubert, 2004, 293). She, in a way, articulates silently that she can satisfy his desires by sharing her privacy with him. Therefore, objects also function as the tangible signs of the abstract world of sensations. Right after she consents to his love, Frédéric rents a flat where he can meet her secretly and goes shopping for new furniture, completing his ritual by buying precious scents, silk, lace and satin slippers: Like "somebody decking out an altar of repose" (Flaubert, 2004, 297), he replaces the furniture and neatens the curtains. Frédéric gets ready for his guest like a meticulous housewife rather than a passionate lover. His sphere of desire, which is crammed with these interior household objects, shatters when Madame Arnoux does not arrive. Her temporal absence is substituted immediately by looking at shop windows on the street: "a bookseller's, a saddler's, and an undertaker's and soon he knew all the titles of the books, all the pieces of harness, all the mourning material" (Flaubert, 2004, 299). The tragi-comical scene reveals the extreme anxiety he experiences and his ability to find substitutes immediately. His desire for the world of Monsieur Arnoux leads him to a fetishistic fixation with Madame Arnoux, and her absence leaves him walking the streets aimlessly, glancing at shop windows and objects which will keep his addictive mind busy: "He gazed at the cracks between the paving-stones, the mouths of the drainpipes, the street-lamps, and the numbers over the doors. The tiniest objects become companions for him" (Flaubert, 2004, 300). When he finally realises that she will never come, he easily refocuses his attention on Rosanette: another of Monsieur Arnoux's "possessions".

The objects not only serve as details in a setting but also complete characterisation and constitute an organic whole with the characters – like the objects in Frédéric's house, which signify his good taste and elegance.

Curry (1997) asserts that “Many objects and furniture in *L'Éducation sentimentale* connote the characters' lives, and they serve to integrate the description into the narrative. Flaubert follows in the Balzacian tradition which establishes a harmony between the individual and his/her surrounding” (137-8). For instance, when visiting Rosanette at her apartment, Frédéric finds himself in her dressing-room which is apparently the busiest part of the house:

The walls, the armchairs, and a huge spring divan were covered in chintz with a bold leaf pattern; on a marble table there were two large china basins; some crystal shelves above were loaded with boxes; the fire was reflected in a tall cheval-glass; a cloth was draped over the edge of a bath, and the scents of almond paste and benzoin filled the air. (Flaubert, 2004, 144)

In accordance with the realist tradition, there is evident harmony between Rosanette's character and the space she lives in. It is not surprising that the most active part of the house is the dressing room since she makes her living by being a mistress to wealthy men. The detailed portrayal of her toiletry implies a certain coquettishness and reflects her general fastidiousness about her appearance.

Even though detailed descriptions of the objects function to display a middleclass lifestyle and unfulfilled desires, an arbitrariness and a carnivalesque ambiguity reveals itself through the depiction of the art objects, which makes the search for meaning impossible. “The readers attempting to motivate signs and produce a natural meaning from the text will find they have been made fools of, and those who are more wary will be, perhaps, ‘demoralized’ by the emptiness of signs and arbitrariness of their meanings” (Culler, 1974, 108-9).

Whereas Balzac wrote his texts in a coherent way in which every action has a reason and scenes develop gradually as their meaning is established, arbitrariness and heterogeneity replace unity and coherence in Flaubert's novels (Culler, 1974, 94-7). As Culler also notes, the ball night scene lasts for pages, in which Rosanette's clothes, the dances of the Polish woman and the Swiss girl, the uniforms of the servants and the radiance of the chandelier in the parlour are elaborately described and surely the detailed descriptions of the objects contribute to the atmosphere of be disturbing enough for the traditional reader, but in this novel Flaubert takes the realist novel one step farther (Ibid.). In “The Reality Effect”, Barthes (1989) argues that “the pure and simple ‘representation’ of the ‘real’, the

naked relation of ‘what is’ (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning” (146). Eventually, signs begin to refer to themselves rather than having any implicit meaning. The ball scene exists for the sake of the ball scene alone, just as it would be in real life, signifying itself instead of an upcoming dramatic event.

Whereas trivial incidents and exaggerated descriptions of objects are narrated down to the last detail, seemingly important events are summarized in a few sentences. For instance, the marriage of Frédéric’s best friend, Deslauriers, to Louise and the death of Dussardier, also a close friend in Frédéric’s milieu, are narrated in only one page, while the fifteen years following these incidents are encapsulated in a single laconic sentence: “He [Frédéric] travelled the world” (Flaubert, 2004, 451). This kind of irony is also evident in the title of the novel. *L’Éducation sentimentale* suggests a plot about the development of a character and life lessons learned; however, the novel in which characters never learn anything substantial, even though a great number of events do happen, is a “*Bildungsroman* without the *Bildung*” (Culler, 1974, 155). *L’Éducation sentimentale* presents a parody of a romantic hero, one who is resistant to learning.

CONCLUSION

L’Éducation sentimentale has a vital place in the development of the novel genre because it deviates from the structure of the traditional novel, which places emphasis on characterisation and the development of character. By contrast, *L’Éducation sentimentale* portrays a fickle and day-dreaming anti-hero who matures neither psychologically nor morally in the course of his life journey. Frédéric presents himself as a romantic hero but he never truly loves his beloved. His image and how others perceive him is more significant to him than his personal relationships. Even in the middle of love’s agonies he soothes his pain with “objets d’art”. In this respect, Frédéric represents the typically superficial consumerist individual of modern times. Consequently, since the reader sees everything through Frédéric’s lenses, the novel, instead of focusing on people, prefers to engage in descriptions of the objects that surround the characters and which complement the setting. Thus, through his use of extravagant detail and the hegemony of objects, and ironies, Flaubert manages to upend the traditional realist novel. Instead of formulating a way of writing in which form is dominated by content, Flaubert introduces an experimental mode in which formal elements flourish but which sometimes leads his novels to a certain level of unreadability (Tilby, 2006, 29). Therefore, as a literary product, *L’Éducation sentimentale* can be regarded as heralding the emergence of the modernist era in literature.

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