

## Sentimental Education

*An essay reflecting the tensions of desire and idealization.*

Frederick Moreau's survival depends on a lifelong affair with his own youth and living in a state of arrested development through an obsession with an older woman. He can only accomplish this double feat because he is a narcissist, a mad lover who invents a beloved. We see his narcissism when he stares at a mirror and finds himself handsome. This is a unique display of narcissism and self-admiration that he will have to maintain if he is to stay alive: his unfulfilled love for Madame Arnoux—for himself—is his key to existence.

Frederick uses delusion to fill a void and be a man he will never be in reality. Frederick's life lacks substance and purpose, but once he discovers Madame Arnoux, his life is given meaning. Late in life, Frederick meets Madame Arnoux after her husband has died, and she offers herself to him. The opportunity to fulfill his lifelong desire to be with Arnoux stands before him.

As it were, Frederick is threatened by the imaginary love he has for Arnoux menaced by her physical presence. He must reject her to protect his narcissism. Only Arnoux's unavailability to him keeps him alive: "Your person, your slightest movements, seemed to me to have more than human importance in the world. You produced me on the effect of moonlight on a summer's night, when around us we find nothing but perfumes...Frederick became intoxicated with his own words, came to believe himself in the reality of what he said." (Flaubert 277) he must resist temptation to maintain his illusion.

The unraveling of desire is coming to an end. All the obstacles that prevented Frederick from loving Arnoux have been cleared, a consummation of love is all that is left in this moment Frederick shares with Arnoux. "I would have liked to make you happy" (277). Arnoux whispers to Frederick, closing in on the life of melancholy Frederick has created for himself. What better words could be said to a mad lover in pursuit of satisfaction in a beloved. This is not the case for Frederick. "The next moment, an unaccountable repugnance to the thought of such a thing, and as it were, a dread of incurring guilt of incest," (277). In the throes of passion consumed by madness few have been concerned with incest. Arnoux was not Frederick's mother, regardless of how he tried to imagine this to be true, Frederick creates incest to reject Arnoux. Frederick doesn't love her, Frederick loves the desire of idealization, a sense of wholeness in self in a relationship with another person. As a result, he finds narcissistic supply through emotional edging toward but never reaching a climax through a love and acceptance of Arnoux. What would happen to Frederick if he gave into love and his relationship with Arnoux? He'll be without love and without desire. His life would lose all meaning. Frederick must reject the real Madame Arnoux, so he drains their final moment together of any physical touch.

Aimlessness reunites Frederick and Deslauriers, they recall the nothingness they have become. Flaubert ends his novel with where it began, in Frederick's reflections through innocence. In the opening scenes they dreamt of what their lives could be, and the novel finishes with them pondering what their lives could have been. Madame Arnoux became a symbol of his youth; the tension of desire that kept him alive. Frederick's reflections with Deslauriers reveal nostalgic regret and a realization that youth has passed, dissolving any real love Frederick had imagined for Madame Arnoux.