The Routes of Adultery:
Physical and Imaginary Movement in *Ethan Frome* and *Madame Bovary*

Elizabeth Markham
Comparative Literature
April 25, 2003
At its most fundamental level, adultery suggests the concept of movement; it involves a simultaneous emotional and physical movement toward one individual and away from another. An investigation of novelistic portrayals of adultery in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, 1857, and Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*, 1911, reveals that the growth of emotional distance between an adulterous character and his or her spouse necessarily precedes the commencement of an affair. This distance is often represented in the text by a silence that develops between two married characters. Their emotional separation becomes still greater when emotional involvement is withdrawn from the marriage in order to dedicate more feeling to the illicit lover. It is striking to note that emotional distance in novels of adultery is often reflected by the existence of actual physical distance. Voyages in geographical space create physical distance between the adulterous partner and his or her spouse, while at the same time bridging the gap between the unmarried lovers. Indeed, affairs themselves often begin with a journey, and characters move ceaselessly in the text of adultery in pursuit of or in order to maintain an adulterous relationship.

Emotional and physical movement is complimented in the novel of adultery by the manner in which a character imagines movement. Imaginary movement represents the mental and emotional ability of characters to imagine alternative situations, an ability that ultimately affects the choices they make in their lives. Distance is created by imaginary movement when it weakens a character’s link to reality by allowing him or her to contemplate other imaginary possibilities. If the author denies characters the freedom to imagine other opportunities, he or she entraps them in a series of predetermined events that appear to make their struggles to move or escape seem futile; allowing characters the freedom to imagine other possibilities that appear equally likely within the text grants them a choice. Without imaginary movement, characters’
lives no longer contain a tragic element because tragedy entails the knowledge of a more ideal possibility with which to compare the unhappy actuality. In *Ethan Frome* and *Madame Bovary*, both authors present this fundamental physical and imaginary movement of adultery in such a way that adultery is portrayed as being a more tragic experience for the adulterous character than for his or her spouse.

**Physical Movement in the Novel of Adultery**

A study of the representation of physical movement in *Ethan Frome* begins with an examination of the character of Ethan and his mobility within the text. In the novel, the narrator presents Ethan as having a strength that is potent and yet contained. The narrator notes that the reader would immediately notice Ethan in Starkfield because he is “the most striking figure” in the town.¹ Ethan is even taller than the other naturally tall natives of Starkfield, and he possesses a “careless powerful look” (3). However, Ethan walks with a “lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain,” as if he were a wild animal caught in a trap (3). This portrayal of Ethan’s strength is key to understanding his mobility within the text. Ethan possesses the strength to move easily within Starkfield, and he retains the ability to drive when it is denied other characters. For example, Denis Eady, who had planned to drive the narrator to the train station every morning, ultimately cannot because his horse falls ill. When this happens, an older native of Starkfield suggests to the narrator that he ask Ethan for a ride because his horse is up to the task (7). However, Ethan’s strength is contained in that he fails to move outside of Starkfield and escape the confines of his hometown.

A closer look at two scenes in the novel reveals the strength of Ethan's keen senses and his knowledge of the terrain surrounding Starkfield, which enable him to move around town when others cannot. The first scene occurs when Ethan drives the narrator to the Junction. That morning, despite heavy snowfall, the narrator is not surprised when Ethan arrives to drive him to the station because Ethan is “not the kind of man to be turned from his business by any commotion of the elements” (10). However, when Ethan informs the narrator that the train has gotten stuck in a snowdrift and insists upon driving all the way to the Junction, his determination and ability impress the narrator. Ethan, therefore, is still able to drive even when a powerful train is trapped. On the way home from the Junction the snow begins to fall heavily, and the narrator describes the hopelessness of their situation by observing that “the small ray of Frome’s lantern was soon lost in this smothering medium, in which even his sense of direction, and the bay’s homing instinct ceased to serve us. Two or three times some ghostly landmark sprang up to warn us that we were astray” (12). Just when the narrator is not sure that they will be able to go on, Frome peers “into what seemed to [the narrator] formless night” and perceives his gate (12). He then leads the floundering narrator up to his house and safely out of the storm. Ethan’s keen sight as well as his familiarity with his hometown allows him to perceive something that the narrator cannot, and this capability enables him to move safely in situations that trap and immobilize other characters.

The final scene of the flashback to Ethan’s youth in which he and Mattie attempt to commit suicide also emphasizes Ethan’s keen sight as a key factor granting him mobility. Ethan and Mattie’s final sledding trip may not seem to stress Ethan’s strengths, but, in fact, it is symbolic of his capacity to move successfully. Early in the novel, Ethan himself mentions his prowess at sledding when, after hearing that Ned Hale and Ruth Varnum almost had a sledding
accident, he brags to Mattie, “Oh, Ned ain’t much at steering. I guess I can take you down all right!” (24). Later, immediately before their ride, Ethan, undaunted by the darkness, claims, “I could go down this coast with my eyes tied!” (79) Mattie expresses her confidence in Ethan’s sight frequently in the novel even before the sledding scene. When, at a church picnic, Mattie loses her locket and Ethan finds it hidden among some blueberry bushes, Mattie remarks, “I never saw anybody with such sharp eyes!” (76). Then, after their first trip down in the sled, Mattie exclaims, “I always say you’ve got the surest eye . . .” (80). The first successful trip down the hill seems to confirm Ethan and Mattie’s faith in his sight and steering. However, when Mattie asks Ethan to hit the large elm tree at the bottom of the slope so that they can die together and thus avoid their imminent separation, he is unable to successfully commit suicide. At first Ethan keeps the sled straight, but then Wharton writes, “suddenly his wife’s face, with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal, and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. The sled swerved in response, but he righted it again, kept it straight, and drove down on the black projecting mass” (83). Despite his attempt to right the sled, Ethan fails to hit the tree with enough force, and both he and Mattie survive the crash.

Ethan’s first trip down the mountain highlights his prowess at moving within his own town, but his second trip, in which he fails to commit suicide, represents his inability to escape and move beyond Starkfield, even if the only means of doing so is to bring about his own death.

Ethan’s inability to leave Starkfield, despite the strength he possesses to move around within the town, puzzles the narrator. At the very beginning of the novel, Harmon Gow, a retired stage-driver, comments upon the fact that Starkfield cannot retain its young people. He asserts, “most of the smart ones get away” (4). In its physical and economic barrenness, Starkfield is understandably unbearable for its youth. The weather confines people to their homes and
prevents interaction and communication. The winter experienced in Starkfield is worse than winters elsewhere; according to Helen Killoran, "the story of Ethan Frome is set not merely in winter, but in the unyielding, colorless cold of a frigid winter in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts” (49). Another critic, Alfred Kazin, comments on the economic distress of New England at the time that Wharton wrote when he asserts that “the area [was] rapidly declining” (Springer 45). Neither Ethan nor his close friend Ned Hale is able to run profitable businesses there. Starkfield is thus an unpromising town for its young people, and it is surprising that someone as strong and capable as Ethan does not leave town.

Ethan wishes to move away from town, asserts the narrator, but his failure to do so is a result of situations that arise and thwart his attempts to go. Ethan does manage to escape once from Starkfield, and he attends engineering school in Worcester. He also travels to Florida for a short period of time, and he explains that for a while afterwards his memory of the trip warmed him in the winter, but now that warmth is "all snowed under" (8). Circumstances draw Ethan back home to care for his father, who has had an accident, and also his mother, who, in response to his father’s accident, has stopped talking and lost her sanity. Upon their deaths, he is left in charge of the ancestral home and mill, and he soon decides to marry. Ethan initially believes that marriage to Zeena will “animate, not stifle, [his] masculine proclivities, and initially [it] appeals to him as a vehicle for masculine self-actualization and advancement” (Farland 717). The narrator tells us that Ethan “felt sure that, with a ‘smart’ wife like Zeena, it would not be long before he had made himself a place” in the world (36). Ethan and Zeena agree that after their marriage they will move to a larger town, but the narrator explains that in fact they cannot leave because Zeena is unable to live “in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd’s Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which
attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity” (36). Soon after their marriage Zeena falls ill, becoming a constant drain on Ethan’s resources so that he cannot afford to move to another town. When Ethan considers running away with Mattie, he realizes that he is too poor to go west, and he feels guilty taking money from his sympathetic neighbors. Ethan also feels guilty because he knows that Zeena would be unable to support herself on the farm if he left her, and she could not easily sell it. Thus, while Ethan originally feels that his marriage to Zeena will liberate him, it actually serves to entrap him further. Although Ethan possesses mobility within Starkfield, many obstacles prevent his departure from the town, and the nature of these obstacles seems to present Ethan as a caring and moral individual who places the needs of those around him before his own desires.

Marlene Springer agrees with the narrator’s assertion that Ethan desires to leave town, and she declares that he does in fact decide to leave and attempt to do so, in spite of the obstacles hindering him. Springer acknowledges the issues of money, guilt, and duty towards Zeena, which cause Ethan to feel that he cannot escape. However, she argues that in the end, despite these problems, Ethan chooses to leave his wife. Springer writes, “Were the story to end with Ethan’s decision to stay, his choice could be deemed a noble one. Unable to desert his wife, he relinquishes happiness in favor of a higher ethic of devotion. But Ethan does not choose to stay. He chooses to escape through death and fails in his attempt” (46). Thus, Springer views Ethan’s attempted suicide as changing the reader’s understanding of him as a selfless individual because in this situation Ethan places his own desires before the needs of his wife. Ethan’s failure to commit suicide or leave town does not represent the lack of a desire or an opportunity to do so, rather it symbolizes his inability to move outside of the town.
The fact that it is his wife’s face that causes Ethan to swerve in the sledding scene is significant because the guilt Ethan feels toward Zeena is one of the major ties binding him to Starkfield. In this scene she symbolically interferes with his keen sight, which has allowed him to be so mobile in town and to take risks that other characters cannot afford to take. Maria Magdalena Farland observes that Zeena’s face appears to obstruct Ethan’s sight several times in the novel, not only during the sledding scene. Another example of this "haunting" occurs when Mattie sits in Zeena’s rocking chair and in Ethan’s mind her face comes to look like Zeena’s. This appearance temporarily upsets the happiness that Ethan experiences during his evening alone with Mattie, and it symbolizes the couple’s inability to escape Zeena and the town. By interfering with his sight, the image of Zeena controls Ethan’s thoughts and actions, frustrating his attempt to commit suicide and thereby finally move outside of Starkfield.

In Madame Bovary the presentation of physical movement centers on the personage of Emma. Emma’s life is characterized by constant, restless motion. Although much of her movement in the novel appears confused, Emma’s goal remains constant: the achievement of "happiness" as felt by the heroines of the romantic novels that she has read. In Emma's mind being happy means experiencing deep and powerful emotions, falling deeply in love, and living in luxury and ease. Emma’s education at the convent along with her reading of novels fosters in her a love of wealth and romance. Edward J. Ahearn asserts that “Emma gets an education that ‘programs’ her for romance and aristocratic aspirations,” and in the works she reads “romance is linked to aristocracy and royalty, with which religion, romance, and sentimental nature poetry are associated” (31). Emma is constantly trying to emulate the heroines of her novels through her exaggerated piety, her overzealous mourning after her mother’s death, and her continuous

2 Harry Levin writes “Emma’s sentimental education, accompanied by the excitations of music and perfumed by the incense of religiosity, is traced back to the convent where she has been schooled” (118).
pursuit of romance and nobility. However, she is never able to achieve the depth of emotion experienced by her idols, and as a result she is continually searching. Emma changes homes several times in the novel, and this inability to lay down roots is indicative of her search and of her desire for excitement and romance. She is bored at the convent and at her father's farm and marries Charles to escape this boredom. Later when she becomes dissatisfied with her marriage, she convinces Charles to move from Tostes to Yonville-l’Abbaye in the hope that in a new place she will find the happiness she is looking for. Emma herself refers to her search for romance as a type of quest. Her frantic motion is motivated by a pursuit of the ideals that have been instilled in her by her education.

Emma’s need for romance, wealth, and excitement is temporarily appeased when she and Charles are invited to a ball at La Vaubyessard. In the feverish ambiance of the ball, Emma finds the happiness she has been searching for during her waltz with the Viscount. The Viscount represents the nobility and affluence that Emma associates with happiness, and he literally sweeps her off her feet as they dance. The energy and passion in his dancing passes to Emma, leaving her breathless. She finally experiences powerful emotions that, unlike her mother’s death or her religious fervor, overwhelm and intoxicate her, and they originate in reality rather than in her imagination or in a book. Significantly, Charles does not move at all during the ball; instead he stands at a card table watching all evening, and by the end of the night his legs feel like “lead.”³ He does not share Emma’s love of or need for romance and excitement. For months after the ball, Emma’s dreams are filled with the pleasure she experienced there, and she treasures the one souvenir she has of the ball, the Viscount’s cigar case. Emma’s affairs after the ball can be understood as an attempt to retrieve the joy she felt there, but cannot experience with

the immobile Charles. Ahearn writes that, in fact, “Rodolphe, and Léon, constitute increasingly impoverished romantic and social replacements for [the Viscount]” (31). The ball at La Vaubyessard satisfies Emma's desire for wealth and romance while revealing Charles’ inability to satisfy this need.

Reminiscent of her interaction with the Viscount dancing at the ball, Emma’s adulterous affairs involve a great deal of movement, and, significantly, the first sexual encounter of both affairs takes place on a journey. Dancing, with its structured steps and rules, can in fact be understood as an artistic representation of the flirtatious movement performed by a couple at the beginning of an affair. However, it is important to note that unlike her dance with the Viscount, Emma’s movement with her lovers must remain hidden if she is to avoid being caught. For this reason, Emma at first resists going on the horseback ride that begins her sexual relationship with Rodolphe. She is concerned that her riding with Rodolphe “might look rather odd,” but Charles tells her, “health comes first!” (126). Emma’s concern is significant because it emphasizes the fact that the only licit space for a bourgeois woman at this time was in the home, and Emma’s continuous movement in the novel takes her outside of this private sphere. Thus her decision to move breaks social boundaries and places her in the public eye. Unlike Ethan, who is just another townsperson in Starkfield, Emma, as a doctor’s wife, represents an important and esteemed figure in the small town of Yonville, and her neighbors expect her actions to be representative of the town’s moral respectability. There are several scenes in the novel in which Flaubert describes Emma's neighbors watching her. One such scene occurs at the end of the novel when Madame Tuvache and Madame Caron attempt to interpret Emma’s actions as they hide in Madame Caron’s attic and watch Emma begging M. Binet for money. Emma’s freedom of motion is thus hindered by her status because her neighbors deem her behavior consequential
and representative of their town, and also because they have the power to destroy her happiness by revealing her affairs to her husband. The fact that she defers to Charles before her ride with Rodolphe indicates that she realizes from the beginning that she must hide much of her movement from public view if she wishes to achieve her goal.

As Emma and Rodolphe ride away from town, they mount a hill, and Emma looks back at Yonville. Flaubert writes, “Now and again, as the clouds parted, in a ray of sunlight, there appeared in the distance the roofs of Yonville . . . Emma half closed her eyes to find her own house, and never had this dismal village where she lived seemed to her so small” (127). Thus as Emma climbs the hill, she realizes how confined her existence up to this point has been. Her first encounter with Rodolphe takes place, symbolically, on a plane that is above the everyday life she leads in town; Emma must move beyond this small town in order to experience life more profoundly. At the same time that her physical horizons are being broadened, her emotional existence expands as well.

The couple’s physical journey itself seems to represent the sexual encounter that occurs during it:

As soon as it felt the soft earth, Emma’s horse broke into a gallop. Rodolphe galloped by her side. Now and then they exchanged a brief word. Her head slightly bowed, her bridle-hand held high and her right arm extended, she yielded to the rocking motion of the saddle. At the bottom of the hill, Rodolphe let go the reins; they made off together in a single leap; at the top, the horses suddenly stopped, and her long blue veil fell limp again” (127).

The image of the galloping horses mounting the hill, the climactic leap, and the limp veil all combine to represent the sexual encounter. Flaubert even uses the same word to describe Emma’s actions during the ride as during the seduction. He writes that as her horse gallops Emma “yielded to the rocking motion of the saddle,” and when she succumbs to Rodolphe’s seduction, Flaubert observes that Emma “hid her face, she yielded” (127, 129). Thus the
yielding in the journey foreshadows the yielding to Rodolphe, and the trip symbolically represents its conclusion.

Another important aspect of the journey itself is the way in which the couple’s movement in the woods reflects Emma’s movement throughout the novel. Rodolphe leads Emma into the woods without knowing where he will take her; at one point Emma asks him where they are going, and he does not respond. Therefore, the couple’s wandering is, in many respects, aimless, although it can be understood as having a goal, namely seduction. An outsider could assume, just as Charles did, that the couple’s movement represents an end within itself in that it achieves the goal of giving Emma exercise. Instead, both Rodolphe and Emma know that their movement is only a means to an end. Emma’s confused movement in the novel might also seem to be an end in itself in that it takes her places and unites her with her lovers. However, Emma’s movement is, for her, only a means by which to achieve the happiness she desires—happiness that she does not find with her lovers because her affairs come to resemble the marriage she seeks to escape. Thus the couple’s movement in this scene occupies the same position in relation to the characters’ ultimate goal that Emma’s movement occupies in relation to her goal in the novel as a whole.

After Emma yields to Rodolphe, she is ecstatic because she believes that she has finally become like the romantic heroines of her novels. “She summoned the heroines from the books she had read, and the lyric host of these unchaste women began their chorus in her memory, sister-voices, enticing her. She merged into her own imaginings, playing a real part, realizing the long dream of her youth . . .” recounts Flaubert (131). Emma believes that through the commencement of an affair with Rodolphe, marked by physical movement, she has overcome her unhappiness and joined the women she has read and dreamed about.
Emma’s first sexual encounter with Léon also takes place on a trip, when the couple is actually in motion in a cab, and Flaubert’s manner of narrating this scene focuses attention on the way in which Emma’s motion causes her to be noticed in the novel. Reminiscent of her resistance to riding with Rodolphe, Emma at first resists joining Léon in the carriage. She is again afraid of exposing herself to public view. The inhabitants of Rouen do in fact watch the strange sight of a carriage without a destination riding through Rouen and passing by the same sites again and again, but when Emma finally descends from the carriage, her face is veiled and hidden and she escapes unrecognized. The narrator does not enter the carriage with Emma and Léon. Instead he becomes just another pair of eyes watching the vehicle, and Flaubert writes, "the bourgeois gaped in amazement at this extraordinary thing appearing in a provincial town, a carriage with its blinds shut, coming into view like this over and over again, as secret as the grave and shuddering along like a ship at sea" (199). By choosing to focus on the action occurring outside rather than inside the carriage, the narrator emphasizes the power of motion to attract attention. If the narrator had remained inside the carriage, the reader would not have had the opportunity to view Emma’s actions as they appear to those around her. The narrator makes a conscious decision to draw back from the carriage in order to distance the reader from the main character and increase his or her understanding of the significance of Emma’s movement.

Just as Emma and Rodolphe had no destination in the woods, Léon and Emma’s carriage is not headed anywhere in particular. When the driver asks Léon, “Where to, monsieur?” Léon responds, “Wherever you like!” (198). The cab passes by many of the well-known sites in Rouen, but each time the driver stops, Léon yells for him to continue. Also reminding the reader of the trip with Rodolphe, the horses pulling Léon and Emma’s carriage gallop up and down hills, symbolically representing the encounter taking place within the carriage. Flaubert
describes the confusion of the coachman who periodically “cast a despairing glance at various taverns. He could not see what passion for locomotion drove this pair into never wanting to stop” (199). Emma and Léon’s constant, seemingly confused motion recalls the motion of Rodolphe and Emma, and again reflects Emma’s movement throughout the novel as she restlessly pursues her dreams and desires.

Although Emma appears in continual motion throughout Flaubert’s text, the reader notes that she is never able to quit the provinces of France and visit the city of her dreams, Paris. In keeping with the opposition that organizes the geographical space of France, Paris is understood as the site of progress and success and the provinces as the site of stagnation and exile.4 Emma believes that Paris embodies romance and excitement while, conversely, the banality of the provinces bores her.5 Her surroundings in Tostes and Yonville are described by Flaubert as the polar opposite of the glamorous and centrally-located Paris. Harry Levin writes that “the midland that [Flaubert] depicts is a bastard territory, somewhere along the borders of Normandy, Picardy, and Ile-de France, where the speech has no accent, the landscape no character, the soil no richness. Even the cheese thereabouts is lacking in savor” (114). Emma often dreams about her friends from the convent who now live in Paris, and yet she never writes to or visits them. The stagecoach runs between Yonville and Rouen, but no route by which Emma could travel to Paris is mentioned. Describing this isolation, Ion K. Collas observes, “we never have the sense that there could possibly exist a transition between these two poles: the sterile province where [Emma] lives; Paris, with its glittering salons. The two worlds are meant to be separate, and

4 Alain Corbin observes, “La capitale, plus que jamais, ordonne les ambitions; elle focalise les images de la réussite mondaine et sentimentale; elle constitue l’aboutissement des carriers. La province, naguère enfer de l’exil, se fait, de plus en plus nettement, stagnant théâtre de l’échec; lieu des épreuves transitoires, de l’attente anxieuse et douloureuse de la promotion parisienne, refuge de la déception et de la résignation” (794).
5 Edward J. Ahearn notes that “All her life [Emma] yearns to get to Paris but never does” (30). Judith Armstrong writes that Emma’s fantasies of excitement and freedom slowly “come to crystallize in a particular town. Paris is in
there is no hint anywhere in the novel of a road that might, somehow, lead from one to the other” (63). Emma does, however, have one link to Paris through Léon, who travels there to study. Her admiration for the practices in the city is evident when she at first refuses to join Léon for a carriage ride in Rouen, but finally agrees to the trip when he tells her that it is what is done in Paris. Emma’s world is sharply divided between the provinces, where she moves about frantically in pursuit of happiness, and the unattainable Paris, which embodies her desires.

Although Emma cannot visit Paris and take part in the social events of the nobility there as she would like to, she does get the opportunity to interact with her social superiors at the ball at La Vaubyessard. Along with satisfying her need for romance and excitement, as mentioned earlier, Emma’s trip to the ball is significant because it reveals another type of mobility for which Emma seems to have potential that she does not realize—namely social mobility. Also, when looked at in comparison to Wharton’s novel, Emma’s behavior in social situations parallels Ethan’s mastery of movement. Although Emma belongs to the middle class, Collas notes that other characters respond to her as if she bore herself well in upper-class society. One of the reasons that Rodolphe first desires Emma is that she reminds him of a Parisian lady. Collas writes, “Emma, delicate and graceful either by nature or by assimilation of high class manners at the convent, never speaks or acts in ways revealing bad taste” (60). Charles’ manners serve as a contrast to Emma’s social abilities; his character is unsuited for social interaction and, at the ball, while Emma is dancing, he stands for five hours watching the other guests play cards “without understanding a thing” (42). Emma’s inability to capitalize on her potential for social movement reflects her failure to physically move to Paris and escape the provinces. However, it is also possible to view these two entrapments as causally related. Paris is commonly understood as the

her mind the symbol of all exotica- and also perhaps, of erotica. She buys a map, and in her imagination strolls the boulevards, climbs every flight of steps, shops in expensive stores . . .” (74).
home of sophistication and nobility, while inhabitants of the provinces, even those of noble blood, are not considered to be as refined or worthy. Consequently, Emma’s failure to reach Paris, where social class is defined and achieved, precludes her social ascension. Emma’s social potential also reveals an interesting parallel between Emma and Ethan’s situations in that Emma’s adroitness in social situations causes her to be, like Ethan, a master of movement within a certain space. While Ethan’s physical strength and keen senses make him a master of movement in the harsh New England landscape, Emma’s natural grace and beauty cause her to move perfectly in social situations within the provinces. Both characters possess certain natural skills that grant them great advantages over other characters who, as a result of not having these skills, lack the ability to move so masterfully. However, despite this fact, neither character is able to move beyond the place of his or her birth and find the happiness and fulfillment each is searching for. This failure in the face of great potential emphasizes the tragic status of these characters; if they lacked these important skills, then their inability to escape would appear inevitable because escape would be impossible. The fact that escape is possible and yet unrealized heightens their disappointment and suffering.

Imaginary Movement in Novels of Adultery

The physical motion of the adulterous characters, Ethan and Emma, occurs in conjunction with imaginary movement, which influences their affairs and, ultimately, the conception of them as tragic figures. In *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*, Gary Saul Morson draws attention to the plurality of possibilities that exist within a text, allowing the characters this imaginary mobility. He introduces the concept of sideshadowing, which he defines as the antithesis of foreshadowing. Morson writes:
Whereas foreshadowing works by revealing apparent alternatives to be mere illusions, sideshadowing conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened . . . Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. Something else was possible, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that “something else.” Instead of casting a foreshadow from the future, it casts a shadow “from the side,” that is, from the other possibilities. (117)

Foreshadowing creates a world in which all action is predetermined, and thus the wisest course of action is acceptance of the inevitable. In novels with foreshadowing, characters who struggle against their fate struggle in vain, and the reader recognizes their actions as futile. Authors who wish to alleviate the sense of closure inherent in foreshadowing can also use sideshadowing. Sideshadowing surrounds the actual event with its alternatives, allowing what Morson calls “might-have-beens” or “might-bes” to influence the text (118). The present is not inevitable, but instead represents only one possibility among many.

Morson also notes that sideshadowing calls into question the linearity of time. According to Morson, the conception of time as a straight line of causes and their effects over-simplifies actual experience. Sideshadowing depends upon time understood as a field of possibilities in which “each moment has a set of possible events” (119). One event comes forth from this field as a result of chance, choice, or both. When looking back in time, the other possibilities disappear or present themselves differently as a result of their relation with the event that actually occurred. Consequently, sideshadowing influences our understanding of the past and present because it opens up the possibility that the logic of causality that a person uses to connect past events may be inaccurate. A more correct understanding of the past might change the connections that appear to exist between situations in the present. The field of possibilities that existed in a previous moment is seen only as a point representing the realized event, and these points in the past connect to form a line. Sideshadowing draws attention to the field, which was reduced to form the line, and “recreates the fullness of time as it was” (Morson 120). The field of
possibilities represents the context in which an event took place, and often the significance of an event depends on its context and on the other events that could have taken place in its stead. Morson asserts that the events that were not actualized may leave their mark on the actualized ones and thus affect the future.

In a text with sideshadowing, characters appear to have free will because they can imagine events in their lives that did not occur, but could have. Their struggles are not futile because their fates are not predetermined. Ethan’s unhappiness in his marriage and desire for Mattie lead him to imagine other possibilities in his life. There are many points in the text when Ethan ponders other alternatives, such as when he remembers the events that led to his marriage and wonders if he would have married had his mother died in the spring. He realizes that his marriage to Zeena represents only one possibility among many, and his understanding of the causal events which led to his proposal leads him to believe that, had the season been different, he might not have felt the need for her to stay. Springer observes that “upon his mother’s death, Ethan is faced with the endless whiteness of New England winters; memories of a mother who aborted all conversations; no one who shares his curiosity or his intellect; a repetitive routine in his work day that blurs the hours of his day and deadens his nights. It is no wonder that he panics and marries” (49). Ethan recalls that at first he admires Zeena’s capabilities in the sick room, and she brings conversation to a house that had become unbearably quiet. He does not realize that her knowledge of how to care for illness comes from being frequently sick herself or that very soon after their marriage she also will sink into silence, and these events influence his understanding of the choice he made and of the other possible paths that he could have followed.

Wharton finishes Ethan’s statement that he might not have married had his mother died in the spring with an ellipsis instead of with a period. This use of punctuation invites speculation
and opens up the text to the other unrealized possibilities in Ethan’s life. Wharton symbolically
refuses to give this other possibility a conclusion, forcing the reader to imagine the words that fill
the space left blank by the ellipsis. The reader wonders what would have happened to Ethan had
he not married Zeena. Would he have remained in Starkfield, or married at all? Wharton
confronts the reader with the idea that Ethan’s entrapment was not inevitable, but rather one of
many alternatives that chance, as well as choice, determined.

The narrator’s account of Ethan’s tale is also preceded by an ellipsis, the placement of
which was very important to Wharton, and she exchanged letters with Scribner’s over their form
and type (Lauer and Wolff 12). Wharton wanted there to be a break in the text that would
signify a flashback of twenty-four years. The ellipsis also indicates a break between the first few
pages of the novel, which contain the narrator’s own interaction with Ethan, and the rest of the
tale, which is an account of events that the narrator did not directly witness. Thus Wharton’s use
of an ellipsis both marks the presence of other opportunities in her text and indicates the
subjectivity of the narrator’s version of the tale.

The night that Ethan spends alone in his study before the day of Mattie’s departure is a
climactic moment in the text because in it Ethan is faced with the many possibilities of his life
that could have been realized but were not, or that could be realized but will not be. Wharton
writes:

Confused motions of rebellion stormed in him. He was too young, too strong, too full of
the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Must he wear out all
his years at the side of a bitter querulous woman? Other possibilities had been in him,
possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena’s narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And
what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than
when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the
healthy instincts of self-defense rose up in him against such waste . . . (65)
Again Wharton uses an ellipsis to symbolize the possible alternatives in Ethan’s life that would make it seem like less of a waste in his eyes. The critic Lev Raphael maintains that Ethan feels a great deal of shame because of the many unrealized possibilities in his life; in Ethan’s eyes his life has been a failure, and he feels “shame over a lifetime of disappointments, culminating in being trapped (‘most of the smart ones get away’ from Starkfield) and over his deep inadequacies as a man” (175). When Ethan finds one of the narrator’s scientific books and attempts to read it, he is shamed by his lack of knowledge. Raphael notes the “queer note of resentment” in Ethan’s voice when he tells the narrator that he has difficulty understanding the book and also observes the fact that Frome is “surprised and slightly aggrieved at his own ignorance” (176). Ethan’s feelings of unworthiness result from his ability to imagine the other turns his life could have taken.

As a result of his ability to conceive of time as a field of possibilities, Ethan’s evening alone in his study leaves him feeling trapped. He recalls the story of a man who escaped an unhappy marriage by moving west with the woman he loved, and he imagines running away with Mattie. While Ethan is thinking about this couple, he remembers seeing them accompanied by their young daughter on a return visit to the east several years after they had left. A connection is drawn in the text between the happy couple and Mattie through the gold locket worn by the daughter of the couple, which reminds the reader of the gold locket that Mattie loses at a church picnic. As the night continues, the reader witnesses the narrowing of Ethan’s field of possibilities as he realizes the economic difficulties that both he and Zeena would face if he left. Ethan is unwilling to risk leaving his wife, and by the end of the night he refers to himself as a prisoner without any hope of escape; his past and his future now appear to him as a straight line of inevitable occurrences that he cannot break away from. Ethan’s imaginings allow him to
experience the field of possibilities open to him, but at the end of the evening he decides not to take advantage of these possibilities because of the pain they would cause Zeena and the difficulties they would entail. Ethan is a tragic figure because his suffering and his feelings of entrapment result from his awareness of the happiness he could have if other possibilities in his life were realized.

Despite the many possibilities imagined by Ethan in the evening he spends alone in his study, it is also important to note the connection between Morson’s theories on foreshadowing and the fact that most of the action in Ethan Frome takes place during a flashback. Although the use of a flashback is not actually an instance of foreshadowing, the relationship between the reader’s understanding of the actions that occur in a flashback and those that occur in the present reflects the relationship between the reader’s understanding of present and future events once a future occurrence has been foreshadowed. Wharton’s use of a flashback influences the reader’s interpretation of Ethan's freedom of imaginary movement because the reader has knowledge about future events before they occur, just as he or she would had foreshadowing been employed. From the beginning the reader knows that Ethan will not be able to escape Starkfield. Consequently, Ethan's imagining of other opportunities during the evening that he spends alone in his study seems less hopeful. As Morson notes, foreshadowing causes characters’ struggles to appear futile because the conclusion is already known. Mattie and Ethan's final trip down the hill might have seemed more daring and hopeful had Wharton not already given the reader a glimpse of the present. Instead their action seems ridiculous and futile because the reader knows that their attempt to escape will only further entrap them.

The main flashback of the story occurs in the middle of a scene in the present in which the narrator visits Ethan's home. It is as if the hope that exists in the middle of the text is trapped
within the hopelessness of the present recounted both before and after the flashback. Just as Ethan cannot escape Starkfield, the past, as it is viewed by the reader, cannot disconnect itself from the reality of the present situation. The reader, as well as all of the characters in the novel, view Ethan's past in terms of his present, and, consequently, the events in the past appear to be an inevitable chain leading to Ethan's current hopeless situation. Describing the present before the past eliminates possibilities in Wharton's text for the reader because he or she is unable to imagine past events that would not lead to the present situation. However, Wharton does withhold one important piece of information in the present, which opens up the text to the imagining of other possibilities. When the narrator visits the Frome house before the flashback, he hears a whining voice, and the reader assumes that this voice is Zeena's. However, this assumption is never confirmed. Thus throughout the flashback the reader is free to imagine the many possibilities in Mattie and Zeena’s lives because their fates are not sealed. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Hale notes that Mattie's death might have saved Ethan. The fact that this event remains possible causes Ethan's fantasies of escape to seem less futile because it is unknown whether Ethan, in failing to free himself, will succeed in saving Mattie. Despite the use of a flashback, which sets the reader up for the novel’s unhappy ending and parallels the use of foreshadowing in the effects that it has on the novel, Wharton's text encourages the consideration of alternative futures, and Ethan retains the freedom to imagine other equally plausible events in his life.

Because the reader does not at first know the fate of Mattie or Zeena, their imagining of other occurrences in their lives does not seem futile. The narrator does not enter the heads of these two characters to the same degree that he enters into Ethan's thoughts. However, it is still possible to imagine their other options based on the opportunities open to women of the early
20th century in New England. The narrator recounts that Ethan married Zeena because of his fear of loneliness and silence after his mother's death. However, the narrator does not reveal the reason Zeena chose to marry or what her other options were. Mrs. Hale comments upon Zeena's secretive nature when she observes, "Nobody knows Zeena's thoughts" (87). It is probable that Zeena enjoys feeling needed. She enters Ethan’s life when she comes to help him care for his mother, and Ethan is grateful to her for her help and is relieved to be able to turn over the household duties to her. Later Mrs. Hale tells the reader that Zeena’s health improves at the end of the novel after the accident, when she must care for both Ethan and Mattie. Zeena most likely marries Ethan because she recognizes his need for a companion. However, according to Fryer, Zeena’s position as a lower-class housewife is not an enviable one. Fryer proclaims, “Clearly this marriage is as confining for [Zeena] as for [Ethan]. What must it be like to be Zenobia, a woman imprisoned on an isolated farm with only the taciturn and inarticulate Ethan for company?” (159). 6 There are few plausible options for Zeena because she lacks the money, the independence, and the physical strength to leave her husband or to win him back. However, after the accident, Zeena has the chance to make an active choice about whether or not to take Mattie back into her home. Although her choice might seem altruistic, there is also the possibility that Zeena chooses to take Mattie into her home in order to punish Ethan for his unfaithfulness by forcing him to live with Mattie in her crippled state. The possibility of not taking Mattie in after the accident haunts the text because had Mattie left, Zeena and Ethan's fates would have been much different. Zeena would not have had to care for her cousin, an activity that seems to enliven her, and Ethan would have been economically and emotionally freer. However, Ethan would have been able to blame Zeena for heartlessly turning out her

6 Elizabeth Ammons also comments on the strain placed on women of Zeena's time by their social position. She observes, “the prison . . . was the American economic system itself, which laid on most men too much work and
injured cousin, and his anger toward her and dislike of her would have appeared more justified. Just as Mattie's death might have freed Ethan, her leaving Starkfield might also have allowed him to leave. The choices open to Zeena thus weigh heavily on the text.

Just as in Zeena's case, gender limits Mattie’s ability to imagine other alternatives in her life. The death of her parents and her poor health also deny her economic independence. According to Elizabeth Ammons, no viable option exists for Mattie after being turned out by Zeena. Ammons asserts, “Mattie’s prospects are grim. She can work in a factory and lose her health; she can become a prostitute and lose her self-dignity as well; she can marry a farmer and lose her mind” (152). In contrast to Zeena, the reader witnesses Mattie imagining other possibilities in her life. She imagines what the Frome home will be like once another hired girl has come to take her place, and she pictures her own future. Mattie's ability to imagine and describe the future enables her to convince Ethan to take the final sled ride. After Mattie forces Ethan to realize what his life will be like without her, he comes to the conclusion that of the two possibilities that exist for Mattie, death or marriage, he would rather see her dead than married to someone else, and so he agrees to the ride. Although the possibilities open for Mattie to imagine are limited, her future, as mentioned above, has not already been revealed by foreshadowing. Also, Mattie is not trapped by marriage in Starkfield, and her youth seems to promise much for her future, despite economic difficulties. As a result, Mattie experiences the most imaginary freedom in the text, and her crippled, entrapped state at the end of the novel is the most surprising.

Other unrealized possibilities in Ethan Frome originate with the narrator. Springer compares Ethan's life with that of Jude in Thomas Hardy’s novel Jude the Obscure, noting that the universe seems pitted against Jude who, like Ethan, is imprisoned in a loveless marriage and responsibility and on most women barely enough variety and adult human contact to keep one’s spirit alive” (153).
gives up his ambitions to help those around him. Although it may seem that struggle is futile for Ethan as well as for Jude, Springer writes that “Wharton, in contrast, does not leave us without hope in Ethan Frome. The narrator is there to offer alternative possibilities . . .” (44). The narrator has been sent by his employer to work for a short period of time on a job at a powerhouse located near Starkfield. Critics have understood the narrator as being Ethan’s double, a man whose life represents the opportunities that passed Ethan by. The narrator and Ethan have several important similarities, both being interested in science and both having spent time in Florida. However, the narrator has been able to continue his education and become an engineer, while Ethan’s education was cut short so that he is now out of touch with modern scientific theories. Also, the narrator travels frequently and his time in Starkfield is limited, whereas Ethan remains trapped in the town of his birth. Judith Fryer describes the inhabitants of Starkfield as being “lonely and inarticulate” and trapped by the snow-bound landscape, while the narrator is a “more sophisticated looker-on, who is free to interpret and imagine” (161). Alternatives are thus created in the text by the narrator whose life is similar to and yet contrasts strongly with Ethan’s life.

Conversely, it is also possible to view Ethan’s life as being another possibility for the narrator’s life, and thus it too can be understood as sideshadowing. However, in this case the unrealized alternative to the narrator’s life, represented by Ethan’s life, is a nightmare that the narrator does not want to realize. The narrator’s interest in Ethan can be understood as being both a result of boredom, as he asserts, and also a result of curiosity in what his life could have been. He recognizes the similarities between himself and Ethan, realizes that his life might become like Ethan’s in the future as a result of these similarities, and wishes to know how to
avoid this future. Just as the narrator provides the text with alternatives, so the text of Ethan’s life grants the narrator the opportunity to see an alternative to his own life.

The narrative style of the novel also creates possibilities in the text, as does the narrator’s confession that his version of Ethan’s story is simply one of many. Wharton chooses to tell the story through a first person narrator whose knowledge of Ethan is limited. However, the narrator often recounts Ethan’s thoughts and emotions, which would be impossible for him to know and which, therefore, must be based on supposition. When introducing Ethan’s tale, the narrator notes that he has learned the story from many different people and “as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story” (3). Thus the facts are uncertain because the sources vary and are not necessarily dependable. Each person has made his or her own observations and drawn his or her own conclusions about the motivations behind Ethan’s behavior. Even if the narrator had observed all of the events in the story himself, they would still have been subject to his own personal interpretation, and the reader would not have been presented with a totally objective account. Immediately before beginning the story the narrator refers to it as a “vision” of the story, again emphasizing its subjectivity and the possibility of other interpretations. Fryer observes that the reader is told that “there are several versions of ‘the Starkfield chronicle,’ the ‘deeper meaning’ of which is in the gaps - the parts left to the imagination. And we as readers are invited to make up our own versions” (159). Thus, the narrative style further links Wharton’s novel with the concept of sideshadowing, as it is proposed by Morson, through the emphasis placed on other possibilities in the characters’ lives, and also through the fact that the story told is not even true because the “true story” is unattainable.

Flaubert’s use of sideshadowing also grants characters in *Madame Bovary* freedom through imaginary movement, influencing their understanding of their situations as well as their
position as tragic figures. Emma's unhappiness in her marriage causes her, like Ethan, to imagine alternatives in her life. As Lilian R. Furst notes, although Emma's position as a woman leaves her few other "honorable options" besides marriage and motherhood, Emma enters her marriage filled with hope and excitement (21). She lacks a true understanding of the social institution of marriage, and does not see it for the “transaction of mutual convenience” that it often is (Furst 22). Emma instead believes that marriage should be based on love, and she feels herself to be in love with Charles. Flaubert recounts that Emma is at first a very competent housewife, and Charles is extremely proud of her. However, Emma does not find in marriage, motherhood, and household management the fulfillment she expected to experience. As Emma's disappointment with her marriage grows, her long walks provide her with time to reflect on her life and imagine what might have happened had she not married. Her reflections during one of these walks parallels Ethan’s thoughts during the night he spends alone in his study imagining alternatives in his life. Flaubert writes:

She wondered whether, if her chances had been different, she might have met a different man; and she tried to imagine what it would have been like, the things that hadn't happened, the different life, the husband she hadn't met. They were certainly not all like this one of hers. He could have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive, as they were no doubt, the men her old school friends had married. (34)

Emma does not believe that her marriage to Charles was inevitable, and she feels that, had she met another man before Charles, she might have married him instead. Emma imagines this other man to have qualities that Charles lacks, and this non-existent character is able to influence the text because he affects both Emma's and the reader's perception of Charles. If Emma lacked the ability to imagine a more suitable husband, Charles' inadequacies would not be as evident. This is not the case with Charles, who lacks imagination; he can compare Emma to his first wife with whom he was not happy, but he never goes so far as to imagine a wife with qualities unlike
Emma’s who would be more compatible with him. He worries a great deal about Emma’s health and is unhappy when Emma fails to perform her household duties, but he never blames Emma for her weaknesses; instead he blames himself. Thus, Emma appears to be less culpable for her shortcomings and they seem less extreme because there is no one better to provide a comparison or alternative. Emma, on the other hand, frequently imagines an ideal husband with qualities that her spouse lacks, causing Charles’ inadequacies to seem worse by comparison. She recognizes, like Ethan, that options existed for her other than marriage, and these options influence her interaction with Charles.

Later in the novel, Emma imagines her life as it would have been had she married one of her lovers. She attempts to give a face to her dream husband who previously had only existed as the antithesis of Charles. When she realizes that Léon is in love with her, she dreams of the happiness of being married to him, and denies the inevitability of her current state by lamenting, "Oh! If only heaven had willed it! And why not? What prevented it? . . ." (81). Like Wharton, Flaubert uses an ellipsis here to grant the reader the freedom to imagine other possibilities in Emma’s life. Emma's imagining of life with Léon occupies her to such an extent that she is actually happier when she is dreaming about him than when he is physically present. Flaubert writes, “she sought solitude, the better to take her pleasure, undistracted, in images of him. The actual sight of him upset these voluptuous meditations” (85). Thus Emma longs for this unrealized alternative in her life.

Emma also fantasizes about the possibility of marrying Rodolphe. Flaubert draws a connection between Emma's hatred for her husband and her love for Rodolphe when he notes that as one increases, so does the other. It is again evident that Emma's ability to imagine the happiness she would have felt had she married Rodolphe influences her understanding of Charles.
and her current emotional state. Emma's dreams culminate in the hope of escaping with Rodolphe. She imagines them traveling for seven days into a new land and never returning. The creation of Emma's new world in seven days reflects the creation of the earth by God, and in this parallel universe other possibilities exist for Emma; there she is able to be happy with Rodolphe. Emma thus overcomes the linearity of time and experience by creating a new world for herself that is based on the missed opportunities in her life.

Motherhood represents another chance to open up new possibilities for Emma. During her pregnancy, Charles talks incessantly about their child, causing Emma to dream about it also. She hopes this child will be a boy because, as Flaubert explains:

"... this idea of having a male child was like an anticipated revenge for the powerlessness of her past. A man, at least, is free; he can explore each passion and every kingdom, conquer obstacles, feast upon the most exotic pleasures. But a woman is continually thwarted." (70)

Emma imagines what her life would be like if she were a man, and she hopes to achieve this dream in the form of a son. After the birth, when Charles tells Emma that their child is a daughter, she turns away and faints. It is significant that it is Charles who announces the sex of the child because in Emma's mind he is the one who has made her miserable by imprisoning her in an unbearable marriage. Throughout her pregnancy Charles has delighted in the idea that he was able to impregnate Emma. His feeling of power contrasts sharply with Emma's feeling of helplessness, and in his role as her perceived captor he aptly, albeit unwittingly, announces her fate and denies her the possibility of a new masculine rebirth through her child.

At other points in the novel, Emma tries to enter the world of opportunities accessible only to men by donning male clothing. Emma’s wearing of masculine garments cannot be excused, according to Collas, by the “fashion of the times, the so-called ‘mode de la lionne,’” given the somewhat insistent tone in which we are told that ‘elle portait, comme un homme . . .
un lorgnon d’écaille’ . . . that she sets ‘ses cheveux en dessous, comme un homme,’ that her hat is ‘un chapeau d’homme,’ ” (61). Tony Tanner interprets Emma’s choice of clothing as representative of her “bondage” in a social world dominated by men. Tanner writes that Emma is:

described as carrying a pair of tortoiseshell eyeglasses attached to her bodice ‘comme un homme.’ . . . She is not only under the tyranny of the male world . . . she is under the related tyranny of the male eye (a kind of ocular sadism); and she wears, unwittingly, a badge of her bondage as part of her costume. (353-354)

Emma’s attempts to enter the male world, as well as her recognition of her position in that world, are represented by her manner of dressing, and her choice of clothing indicates that she fantasizes about the options that would be open to her if she were a man.

The fact that Emma spends much of her time imagining other possibilities for her life has led critics to claim that she is not in touch with reality and has also granted sideshadowing a great deal of authority in the novel. Emma’s dilemma has been described as bovarysme, a term coined by Jules de Gaultier, which posits the existence of a rift between the understanding of reality and reality itself.7 Although critics have recognized that this self-idealization can lead to success and creativity, it can also be pathological, as in Emma’s case, if “the goal aimed at is unattainable” (Collas 58). As mentioned earlier, the romance novels that Emma reads as well as her experience at La Vaubyessard cause her to expect to lead the life of a romantic heroine. Eric Auerbach writes that Emma has always believed that someday her life will change and “she has even made preparations for such an event, has lavished care on herself and her house, as if to earn that turn of fate, to be worthy of it” (133). From the beginning, Charles' mother is

---

7 De Gaultier’s work, according to the critic Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca “represents an attempt to understand the psychology of the individual by concentrating in particular on the gap between dream and reality, pure desire and everyday life” (3). Ion K. Collas summarizes this theory when he asserts that there is a “widespread tendency to view Emma as a naïve provincial woman affecting to be what she is not, imitating a style that cannot be hers, dreaming of the splendors of a world beyond her reach” (58).
astonished by the amount of money her daughter-in-law spends on firewood, sugar, and candles. She feels that Emma is attempting to live in a "style too grand for her situation" (33). Emma also buys fancy decorations for her home such as fingerbowls, which are not at all appropriate to her social position. The disparity that exists between the romantic life Emma imagines for herself and the reality of the life she leads is emphasized by her attempts to change the physical appearance of her home in order to match her dreams. Emma’s determination to live as if other opportunities had been realized in her life causes her to seem out of touch with the reality of her situation. In fact, she appears to be more connected to the occurrences that did not happen in her life, the events which Morson would describe as sideshadows of the text. These events are able to enter the novel through Emma’s imagination, and they would not influence the text to such an extent had Emma had less of an ability to conceive of them.

Auerbach asserts that all of the characters in Flaubert’s novel suffer from bovarysme, and this fact hinders them from interacting with one another, thereby creating distance between characters and most importantly distance in Emma and Charles’ marriage. He claims that Flaubert’s characters live in a world of “illusions, habits, instincts and slogans; each is alone none can understand another, or help another to insight,” and the principal personage of Emma “is completely submerged in that false reality” (140). One evening soon after Rodolphe and Emma have decided that they will leave together, the narrator shares with the reader both Emma and Charles’ dreams. The contrast between these dreams reflects the gulf that separates this couple, as well as their lack of a sense of reality. Charles dreams about the future of his young daughter, her schooling and eventual marriage. He sees her grown up and looking exactly like her mother as she cares for the house and fills "every room with her charm and her gaiety" (158). This dream reveals that he is oblivious to his wife’s sadness and anger, which has prompted her
to plan a scandalous escape. Emma dreams about escaping with Rodolphe across the country in a carriage and settling in a fishing village where "their existence would be easy and free like their silken garments, warm and starry as the soft nights they would contemplate" (158). Emma’s dream emphasizes her blindness to Rodolphe's true nature. Rodolphe has been involved with many women before, and he does not want the responsibility of running away with Emma and Berthe; Emma believes that his declarations of love for her are more sincere than they actually are. Thus neither Charles’ nor Emma’s dreams will ever be realized because they do not understand the characters and situations of those around them. Their failure to recognize reality as well as their disparate fantasies prevent them from productively interacting, causing the couple to move apart and silence and distance to grow between them.

Returning to the connection between Morson's theories and Flaubert's novel, it is significant to note the way in which relationships of causality in the past are presented in Madame Bovary. The reader witnesses the characters' changing views of their pasts and the consequent inaccurate remembered accounts of causal relationships. When Emma's maid, Félicité, finds her mistress crying, she advises her to tell her husband about her unhappiness. Félicité recounts the story of a young woman she knew in Dieppe who was terribly depressed before her marriage. Emma asserts that, unlike this girl, her unhappiness was brought on by her marriage. However, the reader has been witness to the fact that before her marriage Emma was extremely restless, and she married Charles in the hope that moving to town would end her boredom. Emma's understanding of her past is thus tainted by her marriage. The event that was realized in her life affects her view of the options other than marriage that were open to her and also her view of the causal relationships in her past.
This manipulation of memory is also evident when Emma and Léon are reunited after Léon has returned from Paris. Both have had other affairs since they were separated, and each had almost forgotten the other’s existence. However, now that they are reunited and they are able to renew their affair, they attempt to reconstruct their pasts so that they will seem to lead directly to this final moment. Flaubert notes, "that was how they wanted it to have been, each of them now devising for the other an ideal rearrangement of their past" (190). The field of possibility that existed in their pasts has, in their minds, been reduced to a line that leads directly to their reunion. As a result, a reunion that was simply a result of chance appears to be inevitable.

Flaubert reveals the faultiness of memory by allowing the reader to follow the changes that occur in the characters’ understandings of their pasts as they repress the field of possibilities that existed for them. This particular situation is also interesting because, in contrast to many other scenes in the novel in which Emma imagines other possibilities in her life, here the reader watches her erasing past possibilities. However, this reinterpretation of the past is, in fact, the creation of new possibilities through the destruction of old interpretations of the past. The events and possibilities in her past, which Emma wishes to destroy and reinterpret, led to her current unhappy situation, while the events she attempts to create in her past would lead to new possibilities with Léon in her present and future. Flaubert thus emphasizes the importance of possibilities and imaginary movement in determining Emma’s understanding of the actual events realized and not realized in her life.

Both the freedom to move in geographical space as well as imaginary movement reflect a character’s freedom to choose and to thus play an active role in determining his or her own fate. By studying movement the reader can come to understand the way in which authors grant or
deny freedom of choice to their characters, and thus the way in which authors conceive of the characters’ relationship with their heredity and with their environment; this conception reflects the authors’ definition of the category of human as either possessing or lacking free will. Adultery inherently entails emotional and physical movement because a character chooses to separate himself from his spouse and move closer to a lover. However, despite Ethan’s strength and Emma’s restlessness, neither is able to escape a certain circumscribed space. This confinement is reflected in the “geography” of the characters’ affairs in that the authors grant the characters the freedom to move into adulterous relations, but not to move out of their marital situations. Although Ethan’s love is reciprocated and he finds happiness with Mattie, he cannot leave Zeena and move out of Starkfield. Ultimately, he fails in his attempt to commit suicide. Despite the fact that Emma engages in two adulterous affairs without Charles suspecting her guilt, she does not find in them the romantic passion she expected, and instead they come to resemble the marriage she sought to escape. Wharton and Flaubert ensure their characters the freedom to pursue and take part in these affairs, but not to bring them to a satisfying conclusion. Instead, just as certain locations are beyond their horizons, emotional fulfillment is always beyond their reach.

At the same time that physical places beyond their reach taunt the characters, so do the other possibilities in their lives. Imaginary movement makes characters aware of their failure to achieve fulfillment by allowing them to imagine the alternatives open to them. If Ethan and Emma moved contentedly within a restricted area and were unaware of the unrealized possibilities in their lives, they could not be understood as having made a choice; in order for a choice to be made other alternatives must be present. The imaginary mobility granted the characters allows them to understand that they have other options, such as running away with
Mattie or escaping with Rodolphe. The tragedy of their situations results not from a lack of knowledge of the opportunities they have missed, but from a bitter awareness of the happiness they cannot achieve.

Through the representation of physical and imaginary movement, these texts portray adultery as being even more tragic for the adulterous character than for his or her spouse. The author grants the adulterer the physical movement necessary to enter into an affair, while also permitting him or her to imagine the unrealized possibilities that this affair represents. Importantly, neither of the spouses in these texts imagines having an affair. Charles is happy in his marriage and content to imagine his life continuing along its current path; his ideal future is represented by the image of his daughter grown up and looking exactly like her mother. The reader is unable to view Zeena’s thoughts, but we know, at least, that she does not have to face her fear of leaving Starkfield. By allowing the reader to see Charles’ satisfaction with his life as revealed by his imaginings and by denying the reader access to Zeena’s thoughts, the authors emphasize the pain of Emma and Ethan, who both desire and imagine a happier future for themselves. These characters suffer from the inability to realize their dreams as well as from the guilt of imagining leaving their spouses. Both Emma and Ethan are at least somewhat aware of the pain they would cause if they realized their desires, and several times in the novels they dismiss possibilities because of the distress that would result from them. The conclusions of the two novels emphasize the fact that the adulterous characters experience more anguish than their spouses. Mrs. Hale tells the narrator at the end of the novel that she can see in Ethan’s face that he suffers more than Zeena. Ethan had imagined escaping his marriage with Mattie, and now he must watch Zeena care for and fight with the crippled Mattie. Although at the end of the novel Charles realizes that Emma had an affair, he convinces himself that fate was to blame. This
allows him to forgive Rodolphe, and also, the reader assumes, Emma, and it lessens the pain he feels over the situation because in his mind it was uncontrollable. It is interesting to note that his belief in fate and his way of understanding the situation seem to embody the idea of foreshadowing and reveal again the way in which sideshadowing heightens already present tragedy in a novel. Also, while Emma suffered throughout her marriage, Charles does not live long with the knowledge of Emma’s inconstancy, and his death is peaceful as opposed to her violent passing.

Flaubert and Wharton’s portrayal of physical and imaginary movement in these texts in order to reveal the greater suffering of the adulterous characters as opposed to their spouses, the traditional victims of adultery, is convincing because the reader is led to feel sympathy with these characters. Both Ethan and Emma are to a certain extent more aware of the world they live in than those around them. Their unhappiness shows that they realize that more exists to life than what is valued by the societies of their times. The reader comes to feel contempt for those characters who accept things as they are, who believe in the standards and values society sets for them, and who are content to go through each day of their pitiful existences without questioning the purpose behind their actions. Charles and Zeena represent this type of character, who is not just unwilling, but unable to look beyond everyday life and recognize the smallness of his or her existence. The reader sympathizes with Emma and Ethan because their adulterous affairs are not just examples of idle pleasure seeking, but instead represent these characters’ idealistic understandings of life as having a meaning and an importance that is not delimited by the place, time, or society they live in. Although they do not find what they are searching for, the fact that they know to search for something greater is admirable and reveals an understanding of life that is more profound than the one held by the other characters in the novels.
Such an exploration of physical and imaginary movement in novels of adultery is significant because, at its most basic level, it suggests a pattern, but also because it carries consequences for ideas about the construction of reader sympathy and how this relates to the text viewed as a “sideshadow” of life. The basic pattern or mold of movement in a tragic adulterous novel, as discovered in Wharton and Flaubert’s texts, contains an affair which begins with some sort of journey and also an adulterous character who is free to move competently and skillfully within a confined space; this character can imagine alternatives to his or her life, which would allow him or her to move beyond this space, but ultimately lacks the ability to move away and achieve happiness. Readers understand these adulterous characters as suffering more than their spouses because they feel sympathy for characters who are able to see beyond their time and society and question their existence. Authors thus have the power to elicit sympathy by granting characters a self-consciousness and an understanding of their situation greater than that of characters surrounding them; in other words, by making the characters tragic figures. Tragic, self-conscious characters incite reader sympathy because readers recognize in them their own situations, their own tragedies, and their own questions and desires. They understand the story as being more than the text that represents it because the characters within the novel dare to think beyond the world that surrounds them. Once sympathy is established, the reader recognizes the potential for his or her life to realize the possibilities fulfilled in the lives of the characters. Thus, sympathy allows the reader to view a text as a sideshadow of his or her own life, and interestingly, once the reader recognizes the novel as a sideshadow, he or she becomes even more emotionally involved in the novel and more sympathetic because the action in the novel now has the potential to influence and affect his or her own life as an unrealized, but possible event.
Authors use texts to elicit reader sympathy for adulterous characters, as well as to cause readers to view the events in the novel as possible events in their own lives, in order to force readers to see beyond the place, time, or society they live in, just as adulterous characters do. Their sympathy represents a rejection of the morals and structures established by society, such as marital fidelity, which in many respects is a way to control and direct people’s behavior and thus organize society. By causing readers to take this first step of sympathizing with the asocial character in the novel, authors lead them to question other aspects of the culture within which they live.
Bibliography


