

**THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION AND OF THE CONFUSION  
OF REALITY AND IMAGINATION IN THE PREDICAMENT  
OF JIM IN CONRAD'S *LORD JIM* AND OF EMMA IN  
FLAUBERT'S *MADAME BOVARY***

**Seda Pekşen YANIKOĞLU\***

**Özet**

***Conrad'ın Lord Jim'indeki Jim ile Flaubert'in Madame Bovary'sindeki  
Emma'nın İçine Düşükleri Durumda Hayalgücünün ve Gerçekle Hayalin  
Karıştırılmasının Rolü***

*Joseph Conrad'ın Lord Jim'indeki Jim ile Gustave Flaubert'in Madam Bovary'sindeki Emmanın ortak noktası her iki karakterin de hayal dünyalarının kurbanı olmalarıdır. Her iki karakter de gerçeği görmezden gelip sadece kendi hayal dünyalarında yaşamaları nedeniyle kendi sonlarını hazırlamaktadırlar. İdeallerini gerçek dünyada gerçekleştiremeyince gerçekten kaçmayı tercih ederler. Böylece kendilerini hayal dünyalarına hapseden Jim ve Emma, harekete geçme becerilerini tamamen kaybederler. Kendi hayatlarında nefret ettikleri şeyleri değiştirmektense, hiçbir şey yapmayıp fantazilerine sığınarak kaçış ararlar. Dolayısıyla, hiçbir şekilde gerçekten kaçamayacakları bir duruma düştüklerinde, uzun zamandır gerçek dünyayı yok saydıklarından, sonlarını hazırlayan bir kafa karışıklığı yaşarlar. Bu makalenin amacı da Jim ve Emma'nın hayallerinin hayatlarındaki tahrip edici rolünü gözler önüne sermektir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Hayal, Gerçek, Çıkmaz, Conrad, Flaubert, Karışıklık, Rüya, İdeal.

**Abstract**

*Jim in Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim and Emma in Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary are both victims of their imaginations in that both protagonists pave the way*

---

\* Dr. Seda Pekşen Yanıkoğlu, Ankara Üniversitesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı. speksen@humanity.ankara.edu.tr.

*for their final destruction by ignoring the reality and living their lives in their dream worlds. Since they cannot achieve their ideals in real life, they choose to get away from that reality. Thus willingly confining themselves to their imaginary worlds, Jim and Emma altogether lose their capacity to take action. Instead of doing something to change things around them, which they abhor so much, they remain passive and cling to their escapist fantasies. As a consequence when they encounter a situation where they cannot escape reality in any possible way, they experience a fatal confusion due to their longtime ignorance of the real world. The aim of this paper is to portray this destructive role of the imagination in Jim and Emma's lives.*

**Keywords:** Imagination, Reality, Predicament, Conrad, Flaubert, Confusion, Dream, Ideal.

Nietzsche's Superman and Carlyle's Great Man can be seen as summarising the interest of the century in the hero: the great and lonely individual elevated above the common herd of society by the scope of his imagination, his dedication to dreams and Ideals, his contempt for the prosaic trivia of day-to-day existence. (Tanner, 1963; 8).

This definition applies both to Jim of Conrad and Emma of *Madame Bovary*. Although the two characters are quite different from each other in many respects, in terms of using their imagination they have much in common. Both characters are isolated, alienated figures because of their contempt of the reality surrounding them. They find solace in their dream worlds. However, these are destructive worlds; black holes which cause them to break free from the real. Both characters keep chasing their dreams, since to them it is the only way to cope with the real. To that end they create two different selves, experiencing two different worlds: the real and the imaginary. Ironically, their method of handling the reality brings them to their final destination. Yet Jim and Emma are not the only ones affected by their own actions. Emma's selfishness and Jim's cowardice destroy other people as well. That is why, it is quite the dilemma for the reader to make clear-cut judgements regarding the two characters. Accordingly, this paper aims at portraying the destructive role of imagination as it leads Jim and Emma towards a confusion of the real and the dream worlds. A close analysis of the protagonists' psychological status and the external forces at work will reveal their need to get away from reality and answer the question if they are guilty of wasting their lives, along with the lives of others, on futile dreams.

At the beginning of *Lord Jim* Jim is presented as a promising boy, well-built, neat and clean, “apparelled in immaculate white from shoes to hat” (Conrad, 1994:9). He seems almost flawless. It creates the feeling that this boy is going to become a perfect captain one day. However, it is more effective on a second reading of the novel and tells much more about Jim’s character: “the very first paragraph, which seems to be neutrally descriptive in its enumeration of Jim’s features and appearance, in retrospect seems to suggest the full compound of strength and weakness in the man” (Tanner, 1963:16-17). So Jim is not what he appears to be. He has “ability in the abstract” but he cannot “demonstrate it practically” (Conrad,1994:9). He is a romantic idealist. He dreams of heroic actions, of storms, and he is happy while dreaming. He achieves a kind of wish fulfillment in his imagination. In his dreams he is the perfect man that he desires to be: “He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half-naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shellfish to stave of starvation” (Conrad, 1994:1).

Looking at his appearance and thinking of his dreams, one expects Jim to live up to his dreams. But it soon turns out that in practice Jim is paralysed, as it happens in the training ship. He is “always happiest on the heights” but “when one day a sudden call to real action shatters his reveries, he is paralysed” (Tanner, 1963:19). His intention is to be a great hero, but in actuality he is a coward. The problem with Jim is that he refuses to accept the reality about himself. He does not accept the facts of real life, instead he goes on dreaming: “Fact is to be a key word in the novel- it represents the challenge Jim can never meet, the threat he seeks to escape: his dreams can never grapple adequately with the factuality of the world” (Tanner, 1963:18). Jim lives in his dream world as the hero of an adventure book, just as Emma lives in her own dream world as the heroine of a sentimental novel.

Emma’s dreams are different from Jim’s in terms of content. Yet, she is as idealistic as Jim. One major difference between these two characters is the way they are received by their audience. In that sense Emma is a little bit disadvantageous:

In the fictional reality not only are amorous escapades forbidden the woman; dreaming as well appears to be a masculine privilege, since those who seek to escape by way of the imagination, by reading novels...are looked down upon...Being a woman- above all, if one has imagination and a restless temperament- is a real curse in the fictitious reality. (Llosa, 1986:141).

It is obvious that no one pities Emma, including the narrator. For Jim, however, there is Marlow who, at least, tries to understand him. He tries to find a way to justify Jim's actions. Therefore Emma, being a woman, loses right at the beginning for having the wrong or unsuitable kind of dream.

Actually, the reason for her escape from reality by living in a dream world has a lot to do with her femininity. Being a woman, she is imprisoned in her middle-class surroundings. She cannot change her status in society, she cannot become the sophisticated woman she would like to be, she cannot have the kind of husband she dreams of having. These are all results of her place in society. Naturally, as long as she cannot have any of these in real life, she dreams about them. Most of the time she is in a trance-like state, living in her fantasies.

Just as Jim is a hero in his imagination and a coward in real life, Emma is a lady in her imagination and a simple bourgeois doctor's wife in reality. Therefore there are two Jims and two Emmas, and it is really difficult to decide which ones are more alive. It seems that in real life both characters are paralysed and lethargic, whereas in their imaginations they are very active: Jim is saving people from sinking ships and Emma is having passionate love affairs with noble men. Jim proves his bravery and Emma lives in luxury, but only in their dreams.

The common point between Jim and Emma is that they are extremely bored with their real lives. There is no excitement there or no change. Since they cannot change their fate or change who they are, they create new identities for themselves in their dreams: "Emma Bovary, [a] captive locked within the walls of her cage, finds before her window an 'escape towards all horizons'" (Porter, 1986:67). Jim finds this escape in fleeing from port to port. Thus, the role of imagination in their lives is immense. In other words, they have almost no life outside their imaginations. Of course this brings with it great problems, which cause both Jim and Emma's predicament and the destruction of the people around them as well.

Both Emma and Jim willingly blind themselves to the reality. They do not want to face it because it is boring. Thus they prefer living their imagined lives no matter how dangerous this is. Conrad says: "Imagination, the enemy of men, the father of all terrors, unstimulated, sinks to rest in the dullness of exhausted emotion" (Conrad, 1994:15). It is men's enemy because it makes men confused and thus causes an incongruity between the person's mind and the real life. As Tanner argues, "imagination was a faculty of which Conrad was deeply suspicious. In his work it always represents a threat to orderly and efficient conduct because it causes the

mind to slide away from 'the saving facts' of life and indulge in immobilising fantasies of terror or glory" (Tanner, 1963:29). This is what happens to Jim and Emma. They are lost in their imaginations and do not dare face the reality. When they do, the two worlds collide and they do not exist any more.

In Jim's case, for instance, the disaster in the Patna is a very good example for his confusion of reality and imagination. The man who was dreaming of heroic actions a little while ago, is paralysed when the ship crashes. This paralysis is also caused by his imagination. He imagines the scene of chaos in case the ship sinks and he is afraid of the picture in his imagination: "They were dead! Nothing could save them! There were boats enough for half of them perhaps, but there was no time. No time!...There was no help. He imagined what would happen perfectly" (Conrad, 1994:70). Thus he cannot take action. Moreover, even after the danger passes Jim does not open his eyes to reality. He does not see that he has degraded himself, that he has betrayed the values of his profession. On the contrary, he is terribly sorry that he has missed a chance to save people, to be a hero: "Ah! What a chance missed! My God! What a chance missed!" (Conrad, 1994:67). In fact, the reason for his being on the Patna was also an escape from reality. He boarded the Patna to escape from his notorious past, that is, the similar incident on the training ship. So instead of facing reality and get it done away with, he shuts his eyes off and escapes as far as he can.

Tanner states that Jim is "intoxicated by highly coloured dreams of his heroic prowess" and that in his dreams he "inhabits a different world" (Tanner, 1963:21). However, after the incident on the Patna, he is called to the world of facts by the judges. This is unbearable for Jim: "They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!" (Conrad, 1994:27). Facts cannot explain anything for Jim, because he does not live in the world of facts. He does not want to open his eyes and see the reality, because in that case he will have to face his real self: "He is a man desperate to find a way of leaping out of the factual world altogether, of surmounting that enclosure in which he is trapped" (Tanner, 1963:22). Whenever Jim comes close to reality he leaps out of it. First he leaps out of the reality by boarding the Patna. This ship serves as a dream world for him until he comes across reality. So he leaps out once more, but this time falls into the lap of actual life: he is tried for his misdemeanour. Yet, he refuses to open his eyes. He even refuses to remember and own that he had jumped off the Patna: "I had jumped...It seems" (Conrad, 1994:88). He remembers very clearly the details of the picture in his imagination, the sinking of the ship, dead bodies of the pilgrims, the chaos, the panic.

However he does not remember his jump. This shows his confusion, the fact that he lives in his imaginary world and is asleep in the real world.

This jump is regarded as the fall of man by some critics. Tanner says that “it is the romantic Idealist’s fall into the base real world” (Tanner, 1963:32). After this fall, which Jim himself calls a jump “into an everlasting deep hole” (Conrad, 1994:89), he is all the more paralysed, because he is forced to stay in the world of facts. He has to find a job, he has to stay alive, he cannot find a way of going out to the open sea and forgetting everything. The jobs he finds do not satisfy him because they do not offer him any opportunity for glory. During this suffering period Jim is ready to leap out of the world of facts altogether and find peace. However, another romantic comes to his rescue: Stein.

Stein differs from Jim in that he had been able to put his dreams into reality. Jim is not able to do this. Stein summarizes Jim’s case as follows: “A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns” (Conrad, 1994:163). These words explain Jim’s confusion very well. He is living in a dream and he drowns in the real world. So, as Stein suggests, there is only one way out for Jim and that is to go on dreaming. Being a romantic himself, Stein understands Jim very well and tries to provide a romantic adventure for him, so that he can achieve his romantic aspirations and remain in his dream world. Thus Stein “leads Jim from the world of facts to the world of dreams...to Patusan” (Tanner, 1963:44).

In this dream world Jim is able to achieve his dreams. He brings peace to the country, proves himself capable of action. He prevents anarchy and chaos in Patusan. He is trusted and respected: “Jim has moved out of the world of firm substance, bright light, and clear sound; and into an unreal world where appearances are subservient to the dreaming imagination” (Tanner, 1963:45). However, it does not last long. Jim is again carried away by his imagination and he has totally forgotten all about reality, his past in the real world. As Tanner observes, “though he has a possessor’s eye it is in fact Jim who is possessed by this land of his dreams” (Tanner, 1963:47). Thus, once again he experiences confusion when he comes across reality quite unexpectedly in the person of Brown. However this time, he will not be able to close his eyes temporarily.

Emma, as well, is a romantic idealist. Her dreams differ from Jim’s in that she dreams of belonging to aristocracy, living in luxury, being sophisticated. However, she is just like Jim in her confusion. In her dreams there is an aristocratic lady, living in luxury, having passionate affairs. The

problem is that she carries these dreams into her real life. In her bourgeois house she tries to live luxuriously like a lady, regardless of her husband's limited income. In fact, her confusion of reality and imagination is best seen in her marriage:

Before the wedding, she had believed herself in love. But not having obtained the happiness that should have resulted from that love, she now fancied that she must have been mistaken. And Emma wondered exactly what was meant in life by the words 'bliss', 'passion', 'ecstasy', which had looked so beautiful in books. (Flaubert, 1995:47).

It seems that she had been under the influence of her imagination when she got married. Hence her surprise when she comes across reality. Day by day her astonishment, her confusion increases, because she has to live with that reality, that is, Charles.

However, Emma does not give up dreaming. As in the case of Jim, Emma also uses her imagination as a means of forgetfulness and peace. That's why she dismisses the old servant, hires a young maid and teaches her how to behave like a lady's maid. She constantly buys clothes and goods from Monsieur Lhereux. It's like a child's play. She is not able to see that her husband will not be able to pay for all of them. Her only object is to live a life as close as possible to the one in her imagination.

She is so absorbed in her imagination that she looks down on the people around her as if she were an aristocrat. She is far away from reality, living in her imaginary world in which she is a lady: "The clash of objective and subjective reality is a dramatic constant in Emma's story. Emma does not differentiate between them; she can live reality only in an illusory way or, rather, she lives the illusion, tries to give it concrete form" (Llosa, 1986:146). But while giving it concrete form by her shoppings, her actions, her speech, she moves farther and farther away from reality. Thus when she has to wake up to the real world, she gets ill. Her confusion comes out as physical illness.

Emma lives two different roles: one is the frustrated woman married to Charles Bovary, the other is the passionate lady having affairs with Léon and Rodolphe. She has these extramarital affairs, but in essence they are also illusions. It is not the real Emma Bovary that experiences those love affairs. She just acts a part trying to be one of the heroines she has read in novels. To

that effect Llosa refers to the unreality of the content of Emma and Léon's fine phrases:

These delicate mistruths that the two lovers put forward are always moving, because they reveal their thirst for some absolute, for sensual fulfillment, for beauty- the necessity of illusion, and their effort to bridge, with words, the abyss between their ideals and their true condition. (Llosa, 1986:148).

Thus the whole affair, in fact, is a kind of mutual self-deception.

When Emma makes love to Rodolphe for the first time, she remembers “the heroines of the books she had read, and that lyrical legion of adulteresses began to sing in her memory with sisterly voices that enchanted her. She was becoming a part of her own imaginings, finding the long dream of her youth come true as she surveyed herself in that amorous role she had so coveted” (Flaubert, 1995:175). She is so carried away with her illusion that she cuts off her hair and asks for a ring “in token of a lifelong union” (Flaubert, 1995:182). When she and Rodolphe make elopement plans, it is Rodolphe who thinks of little Berthe. Emma is so blind to reality that she forgets her own daughter.

Emma lives her illusion inside her house as well. It is a lady's house. Whenever she looks through the window, the reality outside slaps her in the face. The more she rebels against this reality, the sicker she gets. Her vascillations between reality and illusion deteriorate her both physically and mentally, as well as morally. She cannot conform with any of the roles she is playing. She loses herself in her waverings. She doesn't want to be who she is and she cannot be who she wants to be: “Emma has something of the Prince of Denmark in her: she never tracks down a firm idea of the kind of self she is, despite being absorbed in herself” (Gervais, 1978:64).

In the end, both Jim and Emma are destroyed by their imaginations. Jim, absorbed in his dream, does not see the danger threatening the native people, that is Brown who comes from the world of reality. So, for the last time Jim is unable to act. He doesn't want to open his eyes and wake up from the dream. He doesn't fight with Brown and defend his people. Thus he causes his best friend, Dain Waris's death and consequently his own. As he refuses to fight with Brown, he also refuses to escape from the natives despite the warnings of Jewel and Tamb Itam. He remains passive till the end and makes his last and ultimate leap out of reality.



A similar inactivity can be observed in Emma. When she is pressed by the facts, that she is up to her neck in debt and has lost Rodolphe forever, she chooses the easy way out. She just closes her eyes to reality forever. Even her death is twofold: "The one illusory and the other real. In the first, Emma imagines that she is dying, surrounded by flowers, candelabra, prayers, in a neatly made bed, like the heroine of a romantic novel. The second death, the real one, forms a cruel contrast with the first one" (Llosa, 1986:158). Even when she is dying she goes on dreaming, being her other self, the imaginary self. In her death-bed she hears the blind beggar singing. It is as if he mocks her dreams. Just at the moment of death she confronts the ugly face of reality: "And Emma started laughing, a ghostly, frantic, desperate laugh, fancying she could see the hideous face of the beggar rising up like nightmare amid the eternal darkness" (Flaubert, 1995:337). Reality is a nightmare in her world of imagination.

It is doubtless that Emma's suicide is a selfish act, an ultimate escape from reality. Jim's last act, on the other hand, is questionable. Is it an act of heroism or cowardice, foolishness? From Jim's point of view it is a martyrdom. He achieves the glory he has yearned for throughout his life, by taking the evil acts of others on his own head: "To the end Jim was faithful to his dream, true to his Ideal...His death is an easy way out. It is the final relapse into peace, the merciful release from the world of action" (Tanner, 1963:55). It is a fact that there is no turning back either for Emma or for Jim. Jim cannot turn back to civilisation and Emma cannot go on living in that middle class society with all her debts and her infamy. So in that sense their deaths are justifiable. However there is another point: both of them leave other people behind and cause their destruction as well.

Emma and Jim are quite similar in their egoism. Their imaginations make them blind not only to reality but also to the people around them. Jim leaves behind Jewel who is faithful to him to the end. He also causes the destruction of the whole of Patusan. He shatters the peace and harmony of the city by paving the way for Brown who comes from the world of facts in order to destroy this dream world and liken it to his own. Similarly, Emma destroys her husband's and daughter's lives. In order to live the luxurious life she yearns for, she causes her daughter to live as a worker and indirectly is responsible for her husband's death.

Jim and Emma's dream worlds cause their loneliness. As they live the illusory lives of their imaginations, it is not possible for others to understand them. Thus day by day they move farther away from reality in search of the ideal. The ideal illusory world is embodied in the island for Jim and in Rouen for Emma: "Yonville/Rouen are the two poles between which Emma's life

rebounds, the two focal points of her duplicity. Each of these settings, by virtue of its size and nature, reflects one side of the double life of the heroine” (Llosa, 1986:153). The same goes for Jim. Just as province and city represent the two different lives Emma leads, civilisation and the island represent the split world of Jim. Still it is not possible to put the blame entirely on Jim and Emma and their imaginations: “Is one guilty for oneself when one has no choice but to be oneself? Is one guilty for oneself when one is in ignorance of what oneself is?” (Van Ghent, 1953:239). Besides their personalities, fate also plays a very important role in Jim and Emma’s predicament. They are split in two and they prefer the illusory half because they are born to the circumstances they are in and there is no way to change that. Jim and Emma are alienated figures lost in their imaginations. Neither Conrad nor Flaubert says that dreaming or having ideals are bad things. They only try to show how dangerous it might be if one ignores reality completely. Because sooner or later he/she will come across reality and due to this utter ignorance, will experience a fatal confusion. He/she will not be able to conform either with the real world or the imaginary one. So he/she will be stuck in between and suffer there until finding a final way out. Thus Jim and Emma come to the end of their lives and it is questionable whether these lives are actually lived or spent asleep.

---

**REFERENCES**

CONRAD, Joseph. (1994). *Lord Jim*. London: Penguin Books.

FLAUBERT, Gustave. (1995). *Madame Bovary*. London: Penguin Books.

GERVAIS, David. (1978). *Flaubert and Henry James*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

LLOSA, Mario Vargas. (1986). *The Perpetual Orgy*. Toronto: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

PORTER, Laurence M. (1986). *Critical Essays on Gustave Flaubert*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.

TANNER, Tony. (1963). *Conrad: Lord Jim*. London: Edward Arnold.

VAN GHENT, Dorothy. (1953). *The English Novel: Form and Function*. New York: Rinehart.