



Adultery in the Novel, from Flaubert to Sally Rooney

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I told him I didn't want to be a homewrecker or whatever. He laughed at that.

That's funny, he said. What does that mean?

I mean, you've never had an affair before. I don't want to wreck your marriage.

Oh, well, the marriage has actually survived several affairs, I just haven't been involved in any of them.

He said this amusingly, and it made me laugh, though it also had the effect, which I guess was intended, of making me relax about the morality side of things. I hadn't really wanted to feel sympathetic to Melissa, and now I felt her moving outside my frame of sympathy entirely, as if she belonged to a different story with different characters.

Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), Ch. 9

I never was in Bed with my Husband but I wish'd myself in the Arms of his Brother; and tho' his Brother never offer'd me the least Kindness that way after our Marriage, but carried it just as a Brother ought to do; yet ,it was impossible for me to do so to him: In short, I committed Adultery and Incest with him every Day in my Desires, which, without doubt, was as effectually Criminal in the Nature of the Guilt, as if I had actually done it.

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722)

If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, *both* the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel.

Deuteronomy, 22. 22

2 And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

6 This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

John, 8. 2-6

7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

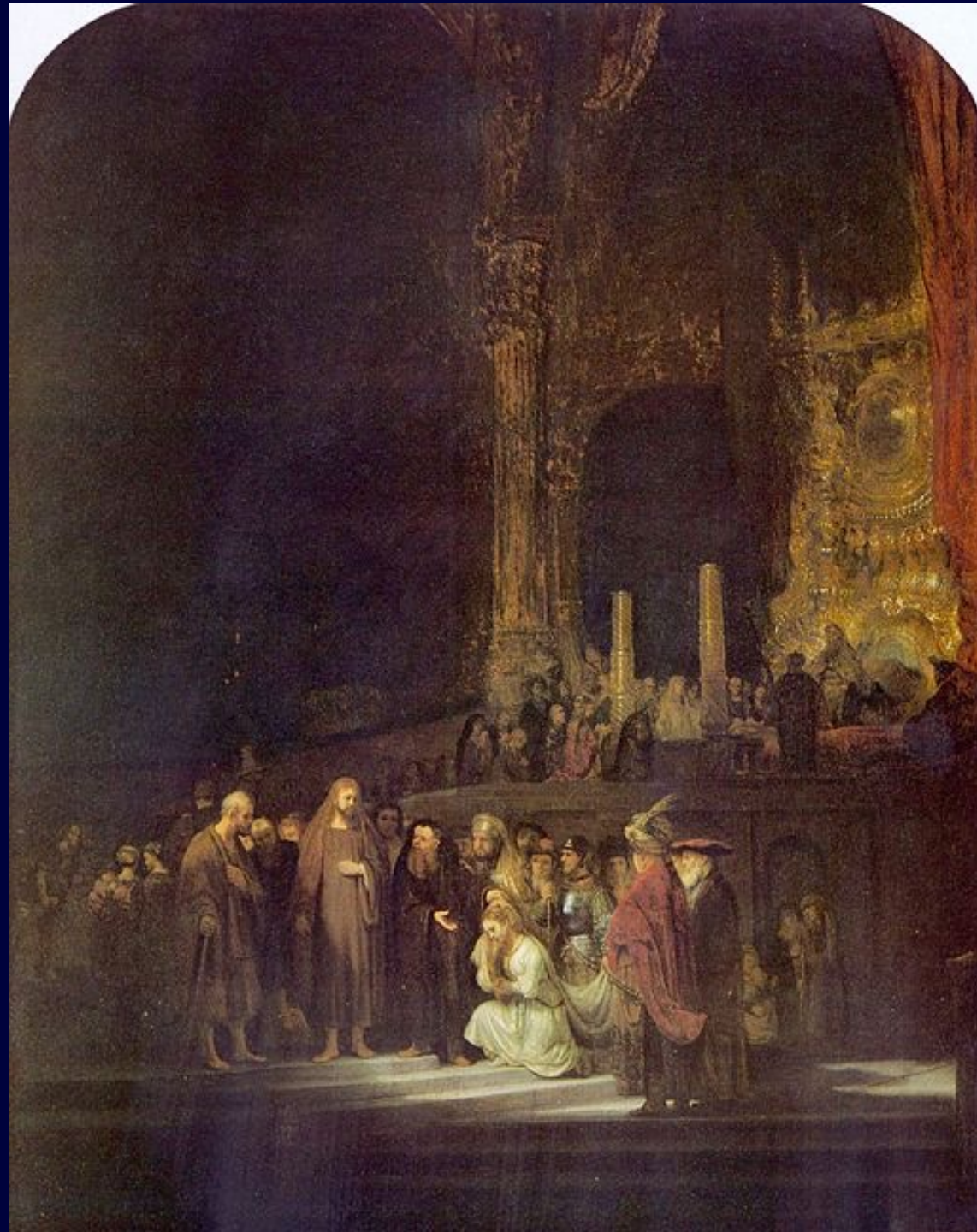
8 And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

9 And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

John, 8. 7-11



Rembrandt, *The Woman Taken
in Adultery* (1644)

The bourgeois novelist has no choice but to engage the subject of marriage in one way or another, at no matter what extreme of celebration or contestation. He may concentrate on what makes for marriage and leads up to it, or on what threatens marriage and portends in disintegration, but his subject will still be marriage.

Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel* (1979), p. 15.

With solemn kindness Sir Thomas addressed her: told her his fears, inquired into her wishes, entreated her to be open and sincere, and assured her that every inconvenience should be braved, and the connexion entirely given up, if she felt herself unhappy in the prospect of it. He would act for her and release her. Maria had a moment's struggle as she listened, and only a moment's: when her father ceased, she was able to give her answer immediately, decidedly, and with no apparent agitation. She thanked him for his great attention, his paternal kindness, but he was quite mistaken in supposing she had the smallest desire of breaking through her engagement, or was sensible of any change of opinion or inclination since her forming it. She had the highest esteem for Mr. Rushworth's character and disposition, and could not have a doubt of her happiness with him.

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) Vol. II, Ch.III

That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence is, we know, not one of the barriers which society gives to virtue. In this world the penalty is less equal than could be wished; but without presuming to look forward to a juster appointment hereafter, we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret: vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness, in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable, and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally as well as passionately loved.

Mansfield Park, Vol. III , Ch. XVII

‘Mine’s a grievous case, an’ I want—if yo will be so good—t’ know the law that helps me.’

‘Now, I tell you what!’ said Mr. Bounderby, putting his hands in his pockets. ‘There is such a law.’

Stephen, subsiding into his quiet manner, and never wandering in his attention, gave a nod.

‘But it’s not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money.’

‘How much might that be?’ Stephen calmly asked.

‘Why, you’d have to go to Doctors’ Commons with a suit, and you’d have to go to a court of Common Law with a suit, and you’d have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you’d have to get an Act of Parliament to enable you to marry again, and it would cost you (if it was a case of very plain sailing), I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound,’ said Mr. Bounderby. ‘Perhaps twice the money.’

‘There’s no other law?’

‘Certainly not.’

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), Book the First, XI



Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present, No. 1* (1858)

Though a calm man, one who had his emotions under his own control, he was no stoic, and his fingers shook as he broke the seal.

“When years go on, and my children ask where their mother is, and why she left them, tell them that you, their father, goaded her to it. If they inquire what she is, tell them, also, if you so will; but tell them, at the same time, that you outraged and betrayed her, driving her to the very depth of desperation ere she quitted them in her despair.”

The handwriting, his wife’s, swam before the eyes of Mr. Carlyle. All, save the disgraceful fact that she had flown—and a horrible suspicion began to dawn upon him, with whom—was totally incomprehensible. How had he outraged her?

In what manner had he goaded her to it. The discomforts alluded to by Joyce, and the work of his sister, had evidently no part in this; yet what had he done? He read the letter again, more slowly. No he could not comprehend it; he had not the clue.

Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne* (1861), Ch. XXIV

“... Louisa Dobede is a girl to be coveted, and, as mamma says, it might be happier for you if you married again. I thought you would be sure to do so.”

“No. She—who was my wife—lives.”

“What of that?” uttered Barbara, in simplicity.

He did not answer for a moment, and when he did, it was in a low, almost imperceptible tone, as he stood by the table at which Barbara sat, and looked down on her.

“Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery.”

And before Barbara could answer, if, indeed, she had found any answer to make, or had recovered her surprise, he had taken his hat and was gone.

East Lynne, Ch. XXVII

‘Oh, Rodolphe!’ the young woman slowly sighed, and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

The stuff of her habit clung to the velvet of his coat. She tilted back her white neck, her throat swelled with a sigh, and, swooning, weeping, with a long shudder, hiding her face, she surrendered.

— Oh ! Rodolphe !... fit lentement la jeune femme en se penchant sur son épaule.

Le drap de sa robe s’accrochait au velours de l’habit. Elle renversa son cou blanc, qui se gonflait d’un soupir et, défaillante, tout en pleurs, avec un long frémissement et se cachant la figure, elle s’abandonna.

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856), Part Two, 9

She snatched at her dress and tore at the thin laces of her corsets, which whistled down over her hips like a slithering adder. She tiptoed to the door on bare feet to make quite sure it was locked; then made a single movement and all her clothes fell to the floor. Pale, silent, serious, she sank into his arms with a long shudder.

Elle se déshabillait brutalement, arrachant le lacet mince de son corset, qui sifflait autour de ses hanches comme une couleuvre qui glisse. Elle allait sur la pointe de ses pieds nus regarder encore une fois si la porte était fermée, puis elle faisait d'un seul geste tomber enensemble tous ses vêtements;—et, pale, sans parler, sérieuse, elle s'abattait contre sa poitrine, avec un long frisson.

Madame Bovary, Part Three, 6

He was coming gaily towards her, when, in an instant, she caught the knife up from the table, and started one pace back.

“Stand still!” she said, “or I shall murder you!”

The sudden change in her, the towering fury and intense abhorrence sparkling in her eyes and lighting up her brow, made him stop as if a fire had stopped him.

“Stand still!” she said, “come no nearer me, upon your life!”

They both stood looking at each other. Rage and astonishment were in his face, but he controlled them, and said lightly,

“Come, come! Tush, we are alone, and out of everybody’s sight and hearing. Do you think to frighten me with these tricks of virtue?”

“Do you think to frighten me,” she answered fiercely, “from any purpose that I have, and any course I am resolved upon, by reminding me of the solitude of this place, and there being no help near? Me, who am here alone, designedly? If I feared you, should I not have avoided you? If I feared you, should I be here, in the dead of night, telling you to your face what I am going to tell?”

Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), Ch. LIV

“It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We’ve nothing to do with all that; we’re quite out of it; we look at things as they are. You took the great step in coming away; the next is nothing; it’s the natural one. I swear, as I stand here, that a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life—in going down into the streets if that will help her! I know how you suffer, and that’s why I’m here. We can do absolutely as we please; to whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? Such a question is between ourselves—and to say that is to settle it! Were we born to rot in our misery—were we born to be afraid? I never knew you afraid! If you’ll only trust me, how little you will be disappointed! The world’s all before us—and the world’s very big. I know something about that.”

Isabel gave a long murmur, like a creature in pain; it was as if he were pressing something that hurt her.

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) Ch. LV

‘But what would you have done,’ he was by this time asking, ‘if I *hadn’t* come in?’

‘I don’t know.’ She had hesitated. ‘What would you?’

‘Oh; I oh—that isn’t the question. I depend upon you. I go on. You would have spoken to-morrow?’

‘I think I would have waited.’

‘And for what?’ he asked.

‘To see what difference it would make for myself. My possession at last, I mean, of real knowledge.’

‘Oh!’ said the Prince.

‘My only point now, at any rate,’ she went on, ‘is the difference, as I say, that it may make for *you*. Your knowing was—from the moment you did come in—all I had in view.’ And she sounded it again—he should have it once more. ‘Your knowing that I’ve ceased—’

‘That you’ve ceased—?’ With her pause, in fact, she had fairly made him press her for it.

‘Why, to be as I was. *Not* to know.’

Opinion was greatly in favour of Brenda's adventure. The morning telephone buzzed with news of her; even people with whom she had the barest acquaintance were delighted to relate that they had seen her and Beaver the evening before at a restaurant or cinema. It had been an autumn of very sparse and meagre romance; only the most obvious people had parted or come together, and Brenda was filling a want long felt by those whose simple, vicarious pleasure it was to discuss the subject in bed over the telephone. For them her circumstances shed peculiar glamour; for five years she had been a legendary, almost ghostly name, the imprisoned princess of fairy story, and now that she had emerged there was more enchantment in the occurrence than in the mere change of habit of any other circumspect wife.

Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (1934), Ch. II

Claire versus Howard. Howard felt one of her fingers thoughtlessly, drunkenly, slip under a gap in his shirt to his skin. Just then they were interrupted.

‘What are you two gossiping about?’

Too quickly, Claire removed her hand from Howard’s body. But Kiki wasn’t looking at Claire; she was looking at Howard. You’re married to someone for thirty years: you know their face like you know your own name. It was so quick and yet so absolute – the deception was over.

Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (2005), Ch. 12

Some vision of compensation flashed in her thoughts, as brilliantly illogical as those floating objects made of light that swam in front of her eyes before a migraine; though she hadn't meant to think about Nicky Knight while she was in Guildford, couldn't think about him. He couldn't exist, not here, in this company today – not with his long hair, scruffy flared trousers, unbuttoned unironed shirt, drawling mockery, thin smiles, offensive opinions, deliciously offensive everything. It wasn't exactly, though, that she thought of him. It was more like sensation, a finger drawn down her body, melting and undoing her, assuaging the impending loss of her little son, which hurt so absurdly much. To block out the hurt she imagined herself bargaining, accepting Abingdon in exchange for that room in Ladbroke Grove, as if the two places existed in some significant and consoling relation, although she knew they didn't.

Tessa Hadley, *Free Love* (2022), Ch. 2