

Madame Bovary **by Gustave Flaubert**





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Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

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Gustave Flaubert

The great French novelist was born a distinguished surgeon. He studied medicine but was struck with epilepsy—it was the fits that filled Flaubert's life with apathy and led him to lead a hermit's life. Having been an early age, he soon turned his energy to writing. His first novel, *Madame Bovary*, won instant success. In 1857, Flaubert was sued for "immorality," but was later acquitted.

An avid traveler, his fundamentally romantic nature reveling in the exotic, Flaubert went to Tunisia to research his second novel, *Salammbô* (1862). Both *Salammbô* and *The Sentimental Education* (1869) were poorly received, and Flaubert's genius was not publicly recognized until his masterful *Three Tales* (1877). Among his literary peers, his reputation was extraordinary, and he formed lasting friendships with Turgenev, George Sand, and the Goncourt brothers.

Despite his reputation as a master of the realist, he was not fundamentally a realistic novelist. Flaubert's aim was to achieve a rigidly objective form of art, presented in the most perfect form. His obsession with his craft is legendary: he could work seven hours a day, many days on end, on a single page, trying to attune his style to his ideal of balanced harmony, seeking always *le mot juste*.

In 1875 Flaubert sacrificed his modest fortune to help his niece, Caroline, and as a result his last years were marked by financial worry and bitter isolation. He died suddenly in May, 1880, leaving his last work, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* unfinished.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Is *Madame Bovary* a "great novel"? We have of course been brainwashed to think unreflectively of Flaubert's work as a masterpiece of modern art. But Flaubert's revolutionary position in the history of the novel can largely be explained by his subversion of the traditional criteria of greatness in fiction. The other major novelists of the nineteenth century—think, for example, of Balzac and Stendhal, of Jane Austen and James, of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—have trained us to identify novelistic talent with the ability to create characters of moral or intellectual distinction and psychological complexity. The heroes of fiction have generally been what James called perceptive "vessels of experience"; because of their sensitivity and intelligence, they are able to articulate what we like to think of as the significance, the "profounder meanings" of human life. To someone reading *Madame Bovary* for the first time, it will therefore come as something of a shock to discover that the central character in this highly praised work should be a stupid, vulgar and cruel woman. Emma has, it could be argued, the intellectual and moral qualities of a housewife from a village near Des Moines who dreams of living in New York and who commits adultery in a desperate attempt to give to her life some of the glamorous pathos of a Rock Hudson movie. If *Madame Bovary* is in fact a great novel, it is perhaps in spite of the triviality of its heroine. And Flaubert's radical proposition would seem to be that literary distinction has little to do (perhaps nothing) with the distinction of the experience and of the personalities which literature represents.

I want to suggest that the importance of *Madame Bovary* has, indeed, less to do with the appeal of *Madame Bovary* herself as a character than with the questions which the novel raises about the nature of the literary imagination. Nothing

is more commonplace in twentieth-century art than the work which takes *itself* as its most profound subject, that is, the work in which the creative act seems to have become a reflection on the very processes of artistic creation. *Madame Bovary* is an early, only half-explicit, not yet fashionable attempt to locate the drama of fiction in an investigation of the impulse to invent fictions rather than in any psychologically, morally or socially significant "content." What is a literary fiction? What is its relation to "reality"? Does art ever really imitate life? In spite of her silly sentimentality, Flaubert's heroine lives these questions with unprecedented urgency. As a result, she can be a very mediocre but highly original character: as we shall presently see in more detail, she allows Flaubert to make of his novel an inquiry into the very possibility of correspondences between art and reality. Lacking Balzac's and Stendhal's faith in the capacity of literature to mirror or designate life, Flaubert submits language to a relentless, anguished attention designed to expose its supposedly reflecting powers as an illusion. Like Emma, Flaubert is less interested in the *quality* of the life literature represents than in the questions of whether or not literature *can* represent life. And it is this crucial shift of perspective which defines Flaubert's spectacularly subversive role in the history of fiction.

In a sense, however, *Madame Bovary* is Flaubert's least radical work, and it is undoubtedly best to approach the novel by looking first at some of its more conventionally novelistic elements. In *L'Education sentimentale*, *Un Coeur simple*, and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert will choose as heroes characters whom he apparently defies us to find interesting, while Emma, for all her mediocrity, is Flaubert's richest, most fully realized creation. She intrigues us from the start by her mere physical presence, by a kind of irresistible sensual glamor. Beginning with Charles's visits to Les Bertaux while he is still married to the unappetizing Héloïse, we see Emma, throughout the novel, in a series of physical poses which perhaps stimulate desire by suggesting an artful absorption in the care and pleasures of her own body. Emma's presence is like a promise of sensual variety and refinement to which Charles, Léon, and especially Rodolphe greedily respond. Our first analytical perspective on Mme Bovary comes after her marriage; before that, we watch her, from

Charles' angle of vision, sucking blood from the fingers she has pricked while sewing, taking a few drops of liqueur in the kitchen with Charles ("... with her chin tilted upward, her lips pushed forward and her throat taut, she laughed because she felt nothing, while the tip of her tongue darting out from beneath her delicate teeth, licked the bottom of the glass"), and dazzling poor Bovary with the variety of her voice, the mobility of her face:

And, according to what she was saying, her voice was either clear or shrill, or, suddenly becoming languorous, it would trail off into inflections that ended almost in a murmur, as though she were talking to herself. Sometimes her eyes would open wide in guileless joy, then her eyelids would droop while her face took on an expression of profound boredom and her thoughts seemed to wander aimlessly.

Léon and Rodolphe are also immediately seduced by this spontaneous sensual inventiveness in Emma's poses and movements. Rodolphe's practised eye misses no detail of Emma's rapid, graceful gestures as she tries to revive Justin from his fainting spell during the bloodletting of Rodolphe's servant. And Léon silently takes in another sexually provocative scene when Mme Bovary warms herself in front of the fireplace at the Lion d'Or the evening of her arrival in Yonville:

Grasping her skirt at the knees with two fingers and pulling it up to her ankles, she held out her foot, in its black high-topped shoe, toward the flames, over the leg of mutton turning on the spit. The fireplace shone on her from head to toe, its harsh glare illuminated the weave of her dress, the pores of her white skin and even her eyelids when she blinked her eyes. She was enveloped in a reddish glow each time the wind blew in through the half-open door.

The variety of these poses, their frequency in the novel, and the amount of detail in Flaubert's descriptions of them make for an astonishingly concrete presence. And the subtle sensual refinement they suggest is undoubtedly, as the nineteenth-century critic Ferdinand Brunetière claimed, Emma's most exceptional trait. Her insatiable hunger for sensations constitutes a rare if limited openness to the world. Her generosity

and her imagination are almost entirely of the senses; as we see, for example, in her indifference to Charles's affection and to Hippolyte's suffering, she is cruelly insensitive to the feelings of others. Emma ruins herself on sexual and sentimental excesses, but neither sex nor sentiment appears to satisfy her most profoundly. Indeed she perhaps has a greater talent for something closer to what Freud described as polymorphous perversity. Emma's sensual life is too richly diffuse to be pre-empted by specifically sexual pleasures, and her pathetic sentimentality is in part a weak attempt to sublimate (to understand and to make sublime) the rich, unreflective life of her body. Thus, while La Vaubyessard becomes a source of absurd fantasy as it recedes into the past, Emma's immediate reactions to the luxurious atmosphere of the ball have a penetrating concreteness. Her actual experience of the ball consists in very precise and varied sense impressions, rather than in the vague and monotonous daydreaming which she indulges in as an escape from sensually unstimulating environments. As she enters the dining room, she feels herself "enveloped by a warm atmosphere in which the fragrance of flowers and fine linen mingled with the odor of hot meat and truffles." She shivers from head to toe at the unaccustomed taste of iced champagne, and notices that the powdered sugar looks "whiter and finer than any she had seen before." As she dances that evening, "she smiled gently at some of the violinist's flourishes . . ."; and, with a quiet and deeply contented sensuality, she eats a maraschino ice "from a silver-gilt shell that she was holding in her left hand; the spoon was between her teeth and her eyes were half shut."

This acute sensuality both cheapens Emma's spiritual life and yet provides the only escape from her exhausting daydreams of love. Incapable of imagining occasions for happiness which do not cater luxuriantly to the senses, Emma rejects her ugly provincial world but continues to think of "bliss" as immediate sensual gratification. Her reckless spending is a desperate attempt to make the fabulous decors of literary romance believable by making them visible. She has an extravagant but exceptionally limited imagination: nothing is harder for her to conceive of than the novelistic adventures which she hungrily but rather perplexedly devours. Therefore, the immediate cause of her suicide is, appropriately, her debts, for money is the talisman with which Emma tries to materialize love. It is as if luxury alone could convince her of

the concrete reality of literary fantasy. Hopelessly sentimental but, as Flaubert says, impatient of anything which she can't immediately "consume," which doesn't provide an instant "personal profit," she seeks sensual stimulation from an extravagantly rich world unavailable to her senses. Bored with what she knows but unable to find pleasure in what she can only think about, Emma tries to feel what she can only weakly imagine, to induce sensations from fantasies. The exhausted debauchery into which she falls more and more deeply as the novel proceeds is due less to her actual adventures than to this more debilitating adventure of exciting her mind to satisfy her body.

It is in literature that Emma seeks the excitement her environment almost never provides, and *Madame Bovary* is obviously a novel about the dangers of reading novels. Now Flaubert's work is *not* a very serious attack on romantic fiction, and this fact should help us to see both the exact relation of *Madame Bovary* to a period of literary history, and the radical, "non-historical" nature of its critique of literature. Emma can hardly bear the burden of serious reflection about romanticism; any cultural or spiritual style can be made to appear absurd if it is "studied" through someone who doesn't understand it. The metaphysical, esthetic and social revolution which we identify with romanticism is as short-changed in *Madame Bovary* as Leibniz's philosophy is in Voltaire's *Candide*. Instead of giving us a certain kind of sensibility in its most distinguished and abstractly typical form, Flaubert depicts the trivial but pervasive ways in which a powerful style of being comes to affect the expectations which the most unremarkable people have of life. Emma's romanticism is that of the fashion magazines, of keepsakes, of the novels which the old woman who washes in the laundry of the convent reads to the girls:

They were filled with love affairs, lovers, mistresses, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely country houses, postriders killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page, dark forests, palpitating hearts, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, skiffs in the moonlight, nightingales in thickets, and gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one really is, and always ready to shed floods of tears.

Who is the author of these adventures? Obviously, no one: the great romantic talents have been filtered through a process which leaves only a sediment of anonymous, paradoxically simplified images. This is the market of originality, a stage in the diffusion of art in which good literature has not disappeared but is consumed for the images it has inspired in women's magazines. As in all popularization, literature is judged by its success; and the simplified forms in which it effectively penetrates ordinary social life finally provide even the standards it has "to live up to."

This popularizing process was of course slower in Madame Bovary's day than it is today, so there was a gap between the diffusion of romantic themes in the literature Emma reads and their treatment (or invention) in the great works of romantic literature. And because of that gap, the mental style of an Emma Bovary is probably a better index of the cultural atmosphere of her period than the romantic art we still admire. For, like most interesting art of the past, those masterpieces are too personal, too idiosyncratic to be spoken of primarily as representative, and we would be more likely to find something like "the spirit of an age" in the pages of the fashion magazines Emma reads than in works where that problematic spirit is obscured by the particularities of individual talent. This distinction is important to remember, for today we are used to the instant popularization of art. In a sense, TV and the press have become our avant-garde; they are, in their hunger for the new, ahead of all experimental art, emptily ready to advertise the still unimaginable. As a result, the time between original art and the public awareness of it has been reversed. Instead of the artist having to wait for recognition, a voracious willingness to recognize everything is necessarily more daring and more advanced than any artistic production which, however explosive or "spontaneous," can never be ahead of that which anticipates it.

But Flaubert's novel has, of course, more than an historical interest. Essentially, *Madame Bovary* is about an exasperated and disastrous attempt to equate reality with its representations in art. In the disappointment she feels after her marriage, Emma "tried to find out exactly what was meant by the words 'bliss,' 'passion' and 'rapture,' which had seemed so beautiful to her in books." Emma's tragedy is obviously that she can't connect these literary fantasies with her own experience, and the sympathy which Flaubert clearly feels for her suggests

that the trivial content of her fantasies is irrelevant to the profound truth about imagination which she discovers in her suffering. The mediocrity of Emma's thought is less important than the artistic rigor of her refusal to accept *any* equivalence between imagination and reality. Significantly, she is never more exasperated than during her love affairs. The affair with Rodolphe could, one imagines, have gone on indefinitely; it is Emma who ends it with her frantic insistence on transporting it to other, more "suitable" climates. And Léon doesn't really break with her; with docility and terror, he plays the pathetic game of an extravagant, brutal sexuality meant to deaden Emma's constant sense of "the insufficiency of life." Nor does Flaubert suggest that Emma would have felt any less strongly that "instant decay of the things she leaned on" had she found lovers superior to Rodolphe and Léon. Emma comes to understand what was for Flaubert the central fact about literature: its infinitely seductive fictions *resemble nothing*. Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* is certainly mocking literary clichés of romance, but nothing in any of his works suggests that so-called great art can provide more accurate images of reality. The autonomous, arbitrary, futilely rich universe of words and ideas which Emma inhabits produces what might be called a totally abstract sickness, that is, an agony and a death whose insignificant cause is simply the exercise of imagination.

Rodolphe, Flaubert harshly notes, stupidly doubts Emma's love because he has heard the same language of passion from his other mistresses, "as though the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow into the emptiest phrases, since no one can ever express the exact measure of his needs, his conceptions or his sorrows, and human speech is like a cracked pot on which we beat out rhythms for bears to dance to when we are striving to make music that will wring tears from the stars." An inadequate vehicle for our feelings, language for Flaubert is no less resistant to adequate descriptions of the world: weeks of tortuous revision might finally produce a more or less satisfactory passage describing the atmosphere of an agricultural fair. An ineffable self, an ineffable reality outside of the self; "between" the two, a language enigmatically indifferent to anything but its own seductive suggestiveness. All human expression and, more particularly, all literature may therefore be (to use the title of one of Samuel Beckett's works) "texts for nothing." That is, the coherence of our

language may have nothing to do with its epistemological accuracy; it perhaps *describes* neither the self using it nor the world we like to believe it designates.

Flaubert, as we see in his letters, was both terrified and fascinated by the verbal orgies, "the debaucheries of the imagination" which Emma impatiently waits for life to realize. He rightly recognizes in the fantastic heroine of *Madame Bovary* a fellow realist (she expects art to be an accurate reflection of life)—minus his own sense of the difficulties and dangers of realism. When Emma naively wonders what in life corresponds to the literary notions of "bliss" and "passion," she is repeating, in reverse, the question with which Flaubert made a torment of art. His verbal asceticism is the strategy by which he would avoid Emma's fate; he withholds his linguistic choices as long as possible, resists the temptation to write freely, without stopping, thus hoping to subdue language into an exact conformity with "nature as it is." Flaubert had an almost Platonic view of reality. He speaks in his correspondence as if "subjects" existed somewhere outside of language, and the exhausting labor to which he condemned himself was to find the expressions which would merely convert reality, without changing its nature, into language. But in spite of the killing discipline to which he submitted himself in order to reach this goal, Flaubert naturally could not help but recognize that language provides its own inspirations; it is a creator rather than simply a translator of reality. As Flaubert writes in an extraordinary letter to Louise Colet, nothing is more dangerous than "inspiration," than those "masked balls of the imagination" during which the writer betrays his subject by allowing himself to write freely and profusely. And so, while devoting his life to finding the "right" words and the "right" rhythms, Flaubert came to have a polemical distrust of *all* fictive versions of reality. He tended, it could be said, to define the highest artistic integrity as a *reluctance to produce*. The subject of all his work, in spite of the obvious but superficial distinction between the realistic and the non-realistic novels, is the excesses of imagination. Flaubert both reveled in and deeply mistrusted those excesses. *Madame Bovary*, *L'Education sentimentale* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* are the equivalents, in his career, of that familiar stylistic "fall" which, in so many of his sentences, deflates an eloquent fantasy with a prosaic detail. Emma, Frédéric Moreau, and Bouvard and Pécuchet are the scapegoats

through whom Flaubert does penance for the extravagances of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* and *Salammô*; scrupulously masochistic, Flaubert sadistically punishes those inferior versions of himself for his own intoxicating inventions.

But is the prosaic any more "real" than the extravagantly romantic? Tostes and Yonville in *Madame Bovary*, while they are meant to provide an ironic commentary on Emma's sense of life's possibilities, are treated as negatively, in spite of their "material" existence, as Emma's dreams of romance. What Albert Thibaudet called Flaubert's *vision binoculaire* (the simultaneous perception of opposite poles of a subject which cancel each other out) is less a corrective vision of reality than a repetitively nihilistic one. The most spectacular example of the *vision binoculaire* is the scene of the fair at Yonville: fragments of Rodolphe's seduction of Emma alternate with fragments of Lieuvain's speech to the citizens of Yonville, and we see both scenes, as it were, from above and at the same time. Neither side of the Flaubertism vision is allowed to settle into a definitive version of reality, although both are presented with a kind of maddening literalness and attention to detail. Indeed, the *vision binoculaire* actually exposes the fundamental similarity between the world of Emma and the world of Homais, between the exceptional and the banal.

The conflict between Emma and her community obscures a profound resemblance: she is as cliché-ridden as Homais, incapable, as Flaubert writes, "of believing in anything that did not manifest itself in conventional forms." Flaubert runs the gamut of these *formes convenues* in *Madame Bovary* (from the trite provincial formulas to Emma's dreams of exotic landscapes) and, given the impossible rigor of his demand for exact correspondence between language and reality, we could say that he comes close to condemning *all* expression as cliché. Flaubert is aware of but essentially indifferent to the cheap quality of Emma's fantasies. More *interesting* fantasies would not necessarily be more accurate representations of reality. And perhaps as important as Flaubert's sympathy for Emma is his less explicit, more troubled identification (as Sartre has argued) with Homais. For the druggist's magnificently comical enthusiasm for clichés parodies but may not be essentially different from the artist's less complacent but perhaps no more successful efforts to make language contain reality.

Indeed, the cliché is the lowest and the clearest form of

imaginative extravagance; it condenses both the appeal and the dangers of imagination. Flaubert had the admirable dream of an ideally free language, of a literature in which, as he writes in a letter, "form, as it becomes more skillful, is attenuated, it abandons all liturgy, all rules, all measure. . . ." This "liberation from materiality" would be the democratization of literature; it "can be found in everything, for example, in the way governments have evolved, from oriental despotisms to the socialist states of the future." The enemy of democracy is the rigid "orthodoxy" of dictatorships; the enemy of a free style is the *formes convenues* of the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, that compilation of clichés on which Flaubert worked all his life with a savage joy. But Flaubert's horror of cliché is of course equaled only by his fascination with it. For the cliché is, in a sense, the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity. Thus the drifting of imagination among its unaccountable fancies is checked not by the adherence of words to reality, but by the ideal *unreality* of a language which disciplines the mind by making it merely predictable. Obsessed by the distance between words and things, both Emma and Flaubert regularize imagination by mechanically formalizing it. Flaubert's prose, far from being "free," inflicts upon us the external ternary rhythm, the non-connective "and" to introduce a final clause, the adverb at the end of the sentence, and the deadening *c'était* at the beginning of descriptions. The high priest of style is thus the master of the rhythmical tic.

By an irony which should now be clear, the care with which Flaubert sought to make language transparent to reality consecrates the very opaqueness of language which he dreaded. For his realism entails a kind of attention to words which can only make them appear heavy and unmanageable. Tirelessly worked over, they finally settle into combinations which represent a difficult but somewhat unconvincing victory over verbal excesses. Flaubert develops, clings to formal procedures which replace the real as an object of literary imitation. Because the terror of art in the name of life seems to be the death of life in art, the Flaubertian style often strikes us as referring only to its own achievements, as expressing little more than an inflexible model of linguistic coherence.

The extraordinary richness of *Madame Bovary* undoubtedly lies in its availability to the different kinds of critical approaches I have briefly illustrated. On the one hand, Emma is an unforgettable presence; her beauty, her sentimental vulnerability and her suffering elicit a sympathy which we like to think we feel in front of fully realized "human beings" in literature. But perhaps the modernity—and the deeper interest—of *Madame Bovary* can best be explained by a certain indifference on Flaubert's part to those very values which make it easy for us to admire his novel at once. The subject of this successfully "realistic" novel is the impossibility of realistic representation in art. More generally, *Madame Bovary* is a novel of epistemological failure: the instruments of human knowledge are incapable of closing the gap between the mind and reality. All language is essentially "stupid." And, in a sense, Flaubert's least interesting, least distinguished characters are the ideal "carriers" of his obsessive theme: no one is better equipped than the intellectually dull and psychologically superficial Bouvard and Pécuchet—those tireless pursuers of "truth"—to expose all forms of knowledge as equally arbitrary, insubstantial and insignificant.

The uneasy feeling of nineteenth-century critics about Flaubert's work is understandable. No one had ever made such a rageful case against "content" in art, or so radically separated the quality of a work from the quality of the life it represents, or sought (so hopelessly?) to compensate for the unreality of imagination by the abstract perfection of pure style. In essays partially reproduced in this volume, Zola, naively confident that literary realism constituted an enormous progress in the history of art's relation to life, recalls his exasperation at Flaubert's insistence on being judged only for his "well-made sentences," and Henry James indirectly suggests the novelistic revolution accomplished by Flaubert in his puzzled displeasure with the thinness of Emma Bovary's character. But the educative value of truly original art reveals itself slowly, and even today we may find something shocking or at least puzzling in Gérard Genette's praise of Flaubert as the first writer to express the essence of literature by an enterprise involving the murder of meaning in language. Indeed, we may be more sympathetic to Sartre's brilliant attempt, part of which is also included here, to study the individual and social situation in which such an enterprise