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Gustave Flaubert MADAME BOVARY



Introduction by
Raymond R. Canon

Complete
and Unabridged

MADAME BOVARY



Gustave Flaubert



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To

MARIE-ANTOINE-JULES SENARD

Member of the Paris Bar

*Ex-President of the National Assembly, and Former
Minister of the Interior*

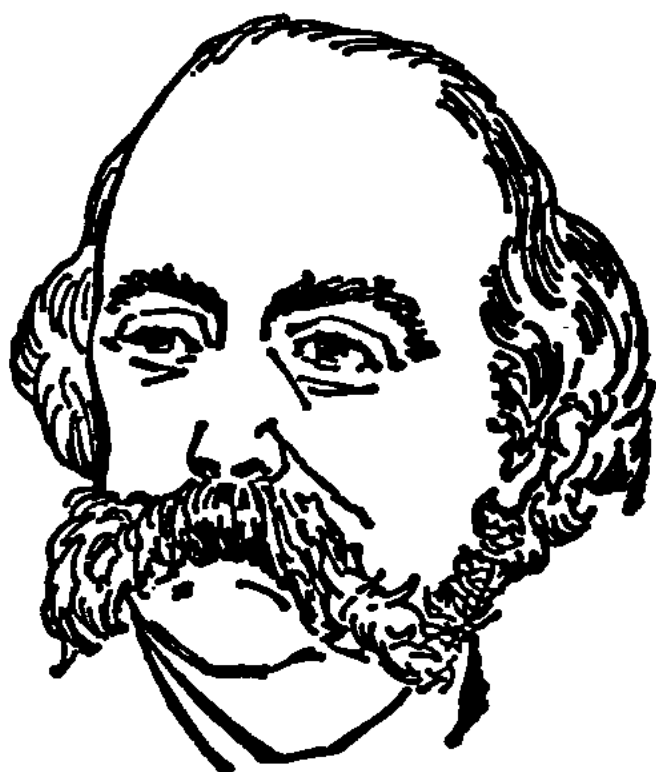
Dear and Illustrious Friend,—

Permit me to inscribe your name at the head of this book, and above its dedication, for it is to you, above all, that I owe its publication. Reading over your magnificent defence, my work has acquired for myself, as it were, an unexpected authority. Accept, then, here, the homage of my gratitude, which, how great soever it is, will never attain the height of your eloquence and your devotion.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Paris, 12 April 1857

MADAME BOVARY



Gustave Flaubert

Introduction

There are few French writers of the nineteenth century who are more controversial than Gustave Flaubert, author of *Madame Bovary*. This disagreement stems in part from the fact that people have been unable to make up their minds how much of Flaubert was fact and how much fiction. Was he a psychologist in the portrayal of his characters or not? Was he a socialist or a champion of the existing order?

While it is healthy to have lively discussion on the merits and shortcomings of an author, it is not so when the critics leave one question unanswered and rush on to another. It is not the intention of this introduction to become embroiled in one of the above arguments. There are many things about Flaubert's writings which can be appreciated without restraint. This is what the casual reader should try to do.

Flaubert was born on December 12, 1821, the fourth of six children. His father was a doctor, the head of a large hospital in Rouen. Gustave was a highly strung child who grew up in the shadow of a father whose will was law and an older brother who had no trouble following in his father's footsteps. For this reason, Flaubert turned to his younger sister Caroline, and made her his confidante. In the summer the Flauberts went to Trouville, which was as yet undeveloped as a resort area. It was here

that Gustave, at the age of fifteen, met and fell in love with Elisa Schlésinger, a married woman eleven years older than he. Flaubert considered this the emotional experience of his life, and he often sought her out in later years. It reveals something basic about Flaubert. He was continually seeking the unattainable, knowing full well it was beyond his reach.

Even before this time he had begun to write, and his earliest works show him to be suffering from the same "mal de siècle" which afflicted so many writers at the time. He did make some effort at establishing himself in a profession, and to this end studied law in Paris. However, his heart was not in it and his examinations were tried and failed. In 1843, he suffered an attack of what some people called epilepsy, although later studies of his symptoms show it more likely to have been a nervous disorder. At any rate, he decided to spend his time in or near Rouen. The death of his father in 1847, and that of his beloved sister Caroline shortly after her marriage, left a deep mark on his life. He resolved to stay on in Rouen to assist in the raising and education of Caroline's little daughter.

Gustave never neglected his writing, although highly dissatisfied with it. He read his first major work, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (The Temptation of St. Antoine), to two of his literary friends, a reading which took four days, at eight hours a day. When he had finished, he asked them for their frank opinion. "We think," they replied, "that you must throw it in the fire and never speak of it again." It can be well imagined how this verdict stunned Flaubert, but he was honest enough to see that most of their criticisms were justified. He had been carried away by the desire to wax lyrical, and to impose his character on that of Saint Anthony. It may be interesting to note that subsequent critical studies have borne out those of Flaubert's two friends.

After a very educational trip to the Near East, Flaubert settled down to write *Madame Bovary*. He was still the same person at heart, aiming for a literary goal he knew he could not reach. Nevertheless, he kept at it for several years, and in 1856, the product was ready. He tormented himself with the thought that the public would not be able to see the visions he saw, when he himself had had to grope so often for words to describe them.

It cannot be denied that *Madame Bovary* reveals Flaubert as a much more polished writer. In *Emma Bovary* he has portrayed a farmer's daughter, not overly intelligent but with a touch of literary appreciation. He depicts the gradual corruption of her and her talents when she is married to a staid husband in a staid Norman village. Her adulterous actions are only an attempt to insert a bit of illusion into reality, since she has been unable to adapt herself to the drabness of everyday life. But whatever Emma's sins are, is there not a bit of her in many of the people of today's world who, to escape from their drabness, read escape fiction, attend movies or watch television?

Madame Bovary may be open to many opinions, both pro and con, but there are several indisputable facts which stand out. The most important is that this novel marks a turning point in the history of this literary genre. Before this time, the novel had been mainly narrative, regardless of how deep the psychological probing went. In his journal Flaubert observed that when he was working on a novel, the story did not matter in the least; his only thought was on the coloring that he was rendering. He meant his whole book to be a series of nuances which would overlap—a collection of symbols.

It can be argued that symbolism is to be found in almost any author, or in almost any age, and this cannot be denied. However, symbolism is basically a nineteenth-century phenomenon, with Flaubert its progenitor in the novel. There are some critics who feel that his influence goes over even into the realm of poetry, but suffice it to say that there are many novelists—Proust, Zola, or James Joyce, to name but a few—who owe a great deal to the examples set by Flaubert.

Flaubert published *Madame Bovary* only at the urging of his friends, and shortly afterwards wished that he had not given in so easily. The novel was published in serial form, and was immediately followed by a charge that the book offended public morality and religion. For Flaubert, who wrote entirely for his own pleasure and cared little for worldly success, the accusation was extremely annoying. Luckily for him, the prosecuting attorney was incompetent, the defense much less so, and the result was never in doubt. The whole affair was a "*cause célèbre*" and guaranteed the author instant fame. Where the novel might have

taken years to circulate, it was now being read all over the country in a few months.

The public may have been excited about the book, but the critics were bewildered. As has already been pointed out, Flaubert was breaking new ground with his novel, and the critics were frankly at a loss to know how to go about attacking it. Nobody remained neutral and cries of vulgar were mixed with exclamations of praise. Flaubert was also the recipient of a great deal of correspondence, some of which accused him of describing people he had never heard of. Out of this came one interesting sidelight. Several years later, when he was traveling in Africa, Flaubert heard of an Army doctor's wife who was an exact counterpart of Emma. Her name? Mme. Bovaries.

Most writers would have followed one success with another, for the public expected it, but Flaubert had got Madame Bovary out of his system, and looked about for something else to practice his art on. The subject that attracted him most was the war between the Mercenaries and the Carthaginians, fought two hundred years before Christ. He began his research in Paris and finished it in Tunisia. The result was *Salammbô*.

The book went through three editions in two months, and again the critics were uncertain how to handle it. They tended to be even more unfriendly and attacked it on its paganism, sadism, and inaccuracy, among other things. The remarkable thing is that, among many of the great writers of the time, the book was admired in spite of its faults. Stanley, the great explorer, who could not be accused of not knowing Africa, was a great admirer of the book, and carried it with him whenever possible.

The critics were no less hostile towards Flaubert's third major work, *L'Education Sentimentale*, and they were no less baffled. The rather bizarre ending left them with the feeling that Flaubert was a cynic beyond salvation, and that it only undid much that was good throughout the novel. But Flaubert worked hard on his endings, and we cannot believe that they are less a part of him than the rest of the novel. Years later, he was still disturbed by the critics' reaction. To Turgenev he wrote in 1879, "Without being a monster of pride, I consider that this book has been unfairly judged, especially the end. On that score, I feel bitter towards the public."

Three books and three pastings by the critics. And yet the fact remains that more and more writers joined the ranks of Flaubert's admirers. All this leaves us with an uneasy feeling. Can he be that good and that bad at the same time? This is where the reader comes in, for it is he who must decide.

Someone has said that conflict was a part of Flaubert's life, and he did nothing to lessen it during his own life. And he has succeeded admirably in passing it on to his readers. One is tempted to ask whether this conflict had any meaning, but the answer Flaubert gives is enigmatic and open to disagreement. He dismisses life as having no permanent significance, and yet in *Madame Bovary* there is an insight into a beauty which can be part of life. There is evidence that he was working more toward this latter viewpoint when he died in 1880, at the age of 58.

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PART I

Chapter 1

WE WERE in class when the head-master came in, followed by a "new fellow," not wearing the school uniform, and a school servant carrying a large desk. Those who had been asleep woke up, and everyone rose as if just surprised at his work.

The head-master made a sign to us to sit down. Then, turning to the class-master, he said to him in a low voice—

"Monsieur Roger, here is a pupil whom I recommend to your care; he'll be in the second. If his work and conduct are satisfactory, he will go into one of the upper classes, as becomes his age."

The "new fellow," standing in the corner behind the door so that he could hardly be seen, was a country lad of about fifteen, and taller than any of us. His hair was cut square on his forehead like a village chorister's; he looked reliable, but very ill at ease. Although he was not broad-shouldered, his short school jacket of green cloth with black buttons must have been tight about the armholes, and showed at the opening of the cuffs red wrists accustomed to being bare. His legs, in blue stockings, looked out from beneath yellow trousers, drawn tight by braces. He wore stout, ill-cleaned, hob-nailed boots.

We began repeating the lesson. He listened with all his ears, as attentive as if at a sermon, not daring even to cross his legs or lean on his elbow; and when at two o'clock the bell rang, the master was obliged to tell him to fall into line with the rest of us.

When we came back to work, we were in the habit of throwing our caps on the ground so as to have our hands more free; we used from the door to toss them under the form, so that they hit against the wall and made a lot of dust: it was "the thing."

But, whether he had not noticed the trick, or did not dare to attempt it, the "new fellow" was still holding his cap on his knees even after prayers were over. It was one of those head-gears of composite order, in which we can find traces of the bearskin, shako, billycock hat, sealskin cap, and cotton night-cap; one of those poor things, in fine, whose dumb ugliness has depths of expression, like an imbecile's face. Oval, stiffened with whalebone, it began with three round knobs; then came in succession lozenges of velvet and rabbit-skin separated by a red band; after that a sort of bag that ended in a cardboard polygon covered with complicated braiding, from which hung, at the end

of a long, thin cord, small twisted gold threads in the manner of a tassel. The cap was new; its peak shone.

"Rise," said the master.

He stood up; his cap fell. The whole class began to laugh. He stooped to pick it up. A neighbour knocked it down again with his elbow; he picked it up once more.

"Get rid of your helmet," said the master, who was a bit of a wag.

There was a burst of laughter from the boys, which so thoroughly put the poor lad out of countenance that he did not know whether to keep his cap in his hand, leave it on the ground, or put it on his head. He sat down again and placed it on his knee.

"Rise," repeated the master, "and tell me your name."

The new boy articulated in a stammering voice an unintelligible name.

"Again!"

The same sputtering of syllables was heard, drowned by the tittering of the class.

"Louder!" cried the master; "louder!"

The "new fellow" then took a supreme resolution, opened an inordinately large mouth, and shouted at the top of his voice as if calling someone the word "Charbovari."

A hubbub broke out, rose in *crescendo* with bursts of shrill voices (they yelled, barked, stamped, repeated "Charbovari! Charbovari!"), then died away into single notes, growing quieter only with great difficulty, and now and again suddenly recommencing along the line of a form whence rose here and there, like a damp cracker going off, a stifled laugh.

However, amid a rain of impositions, order was gradually re-established in the class; and the master having succeeded in catching the name of "Charles Bovary," having had it dictated to him, spelt out, and re-read, at once ordered the poor devil to go and sit down on the punishment form at the foot of the master's desk. He got up, but before going hesitated.

"What are you looking for?" asked the master.

"My c-a-p," timidly said the "new fellow," casting troubled looks round him.

"Five hundred verses for all the class!" shouted in a furious voice stopped, like the *Quos ego*,¹ a fresh outburst. "Silence!" continued the master indignantly, wiping his brow with his handkerchief, which he had just taken from his cap. "As to you, 'new boy,' you will conjugate '*ridiculus sum*'² twenty times." Then, in a gentler tone, "Come, you'll find your cap again; it hasn't been stolen."

Quiet was restored. Heads bent over desks, and the "new fellow" remained for two hours in an exemplary attitude, al-

¹ A quotation from the *Aeneid* signifying a threat.

² I am ridiculous.

though from time to time some paper pellet flipped from the tip of a pen came bang in his face. But he wiped his face with one hand and continued motionless, his eyes lowered.

In the evening, at preparation, he pulled out his pens from his desk, arranged his small belongings, and carefully ruled his paper. We saw him working conscientiously, looking up every word in the dictionary, and taking the greatest pains. Thanks, no doubt, to the willingness he showed, he had not to go down to the class below. But though he knew his rules passably, he had little finish in composition. It was the curé of his village who had taught him his first Latin; his parents, from motives of economy, having sent him to school as late as possible.

His father, Monsieur Charles Denis Bartolomé Bovary, retired assistant-surgeon-major, compromised about 1812 in certain conscription scandals, and forced at this time to leave the service, had taken advantage of his fine figure to get hold of a dowry of sixty thousand francs that offered in the person of a hosier's daughter who had fallen in love with his good looks. A fine man, a great talker, making his spurs ring as he walked, wearing whiskers that ran into his moustache, his fingers always garnished with rings and dressed in loud colours, he had the dash of a military man with the easy go of a commercial traveller. Once married, he lived for three or four years on his wife's fortune, dining well, rising late, smoking long porcelain pipes, not coming in at night till after the theatre, and haunting cafés. The father-in-law died, leaving little; he was indignant at this, "went in for the business," lost some money in it, then retired to the country, where he thought he would make money. But, as he knew no more about farming than calico, as he rode his horses instead of sending them to plough, drank his cider in bottle instead of selling it in cask, ate the finest poultry in his farmyard, and greased his hunting-boots with the fat of his pigs, he was not long in finding out that he would do better to give up all speculation.

For two hundred francs a year he managed to live on the border of the provinces of Caux and Picardy, in a kind of place half farm, half private house; and here, soured, eaten up with regrets, cursing his luck, jealous of everyone, he shut himself up at the age of forty-five, sick of men, he said, and determined to live in peace.

His wife had adored him once on a time; she had bored him with a thousand servilities that had only estranged him the more. Lively once, expansive and affectionate, in growing older she had become (after the fashion of wine that, exposed to air, turns to vinegar) ill-tempered, grumbling, irritable. She had suffered so much without complaint at first, until she had seen him going after all the village drabs, and until a score of bad houses sent him back to her at night, weary, stinking drunk. Then her pride revolted. After that she was silent, burying her anger in a dumb stoicism that she maintained till her death. She

was constantly going about looking after business matters. She called on the lawyers, the president, remembered when bills fell due, got them renewed, and at home ironed, sewed, washed, looked after the workmen, paid the accounts, while he, troubling himself about nothing, eternally besotted in sleepy sulkiness, whence he only roused himself to say disagreeable things to her, sat smoking by the fire and spitting into the cinders.

When she had a child, it had to be sent out to nurse. When he came home, the lad was spoilt as if he were a prince. His mother stuffed him with jam; his father let him run about barefoot, and, playing the philosopher, even said he might as well go about quite naked like the young of animals. As opposed to the maternal ideas, he had a certain virile idea of childhood on which he sought to mould his son, wishing him to be brought up hardily, like a Spartan, to give him a strong constitution. He sent him to bed without any fire, taught him to drink off large draughts of rum and to jeer at religious processions. But, peaceable by nature, the lad answered only poorly to his notions. His mother always kept him near her; she cut out cardboard for him, told him tales, entertained him with endless monologues full of melancholy gaiety and charming nonsense. In her life's isolation she centered on the child's head all her shattered, broken little vanities. She dreamed of high station; she already saw him, tall, handsome, clever, settled as an engineer or in the law. She taught him to read, and even, on an old piano, she had taught him two or three little songs. But to all this Monsieur Bovary, caring little for letters, said, "It was not worth while. Would they ever have the means to send him to a public school, to buy him a practice, or start him in business? Besides, with cheek a man always gets on in the world." Madame Bovary bit her lips, and the child knocked about the village.

He went after the labourers, drove away with clods of earth the ravens that were flying about. He ate blackberries along the hedges, minded the geese with a long switch, went haymaking during harvest, ran about in the woods, played hop-sotch under the church porch on rainy days, and at great fêtes begged the beadle to let him toll the bells, that he might hang all his weight on the long rope and feel himself borne upward by it in its swing. Meanwhile he grew like an oak; he was strong of hand, fresh of colour.

When he was twelve years old his mother had her own way; he began his lessons. The curé took him in hand; but the lessons were so short and irregular that they could not be of much use. They were given at spare moments in the sacristy, standing up, hurriedly, between a baptism and a burial; or else the curé, if he had not to go out, sent for his pupil after the *Angelus*.¹ They went up to his room and settled down; the flies and moths fluttered round the candle. It was close, the

¹ A devotion said at morning, noon, and evening, at the sound of a bell. Here, the evening prayer.

child fell asleep, and the good man, beginning to doze with his hands on his stomach, was soon snoring with his mouth wide open. On other occasions, when Monsieur le Curé, on his way back after administering the viaticum to some sick person in the neighbourhood, caught sight of Charles playing about the fields, he called him, lectured him for a quarter of an hour, and took advantage of the occasion to make him conjugate his verb at the foot of a tree. The rain interrupted them or an acquaintance passed. All the same he was always pleased with him, and even said the "young man" had a very good memory.

Charles could not go on like this. Madame Bovary took strong steps. Ashamed, or rather tired out, Monsieur Bovary gave in without a struggle, and they waited one year longer, so that the lad should take his first communion.

Six months more passed, and the year after Charles was finally sent to school at Rouen, whither his father took him towards the end of October, at the time of the St. Romain fair.

It would now be impossible for any of us to remember anything about him. He was a youth of even temperament, who played in playtime, worked in school-hours, was attentive in class, slept well in the dormitory, and ate well in the refectory. He had *in loco parentis*² a wholesale iron-monger in the Rue Ganterie, who took him out once a month on Sundays after his shop was shut, sent him for a walk on the quay to look at the boats, and then brought him back to college at seven o'clock before supper. Every Thursday evening he wrote a long letter to his mother with red ink and three wafers; then he went over his history note-books, or read an old volume of "Anarchasis" that was knocking about the study. When he went for walks he talked to the servant, who, like himself, came from the country.

By dint of hard work he kept always about the middle of the class; once even he got a certificate in natural history. But at the end of his third year his parents withdrew him from the school to make him study medicine, convinced that he could even take his degree by himself.

His mother chose a room for him on the fourth floor of a dyer's she knew, overlooking the Eau-de-Robec. She made arrangements for his board, got him furniture, table and two chairs, sent home for an old cherry-tree bedstead, and bought besides a small cast-iron stove with the supply of wood that was to warm the poor child. Then at the end of a week she departed, after a thousand injunctions to be good now that he was going to be left to himself.

The syllabus that he read on the notice-board stunned him: lectures on anatomy, lectures on pathology, lectures on physiology, lectures on pharmacy, lectures on botany and clinical medicine, and therapeutics, without counting hygiene and *materia medica*—all names of whose etymologies he was ignorant, and

² In place of a parent.

that were to him as so many doors to sanctuaries filled with magnificent darkness.

He understood nothing of it all; it was all very well to listen—he did not follow. Still he worked; he had bound note-books, he attended all the courses, never missed a single lecture. He did his little daily tasks like a mill-horse, who goes round and round with his eyes bandaged, not knowing what work he is doing.

To spare him expense his mother sent him every week by the carrier a piece of veal baked in the oven, with which he lunched when he came back from the hospital, while he sat kicking his feet against the wall. After this he had to run off to lectures, to the operation-room, to the hospital, and return to his home at the other end of the town. In the evening, after the poor dinner of his landlord, he went back to his room and set to work again in his wet clothes, which smoked as he sat in front of the hot stove.

On the fine summer evenings, at the time when the close streets are empty, when the servants are playing shuttle-cock at the doors, he opened his window and leaned out. The river, that makes of this quarter of Rouen a wretched little Venice, flowed beneath him, between the bridges and the railings, yellow, violet, or blue. Working men, kneeling on the banks, washed their bare arms in the water. On poles projecting from the attics, skeins of cotton were drying in the air. Opposite, beyond the roofs, spread the pure heaven with the red sun setting. How pleasant it must be at home! How fresh under the beech-tree! And he expanded his nostrils to breathe in the sweet odours of the country which did not reach him.

He grew thin, his figure became taller, his face took a saddened look that made it nearly interesting. Naturally, through indifference, he abandoned all the resolutions he had made. Once he missed a lecture; the next day all the lectures; and, enjoying his idleness, little by little, he gave up work altogether. He got into the habit of going to the public-house, and had a passion for dominoes. To shut himself up every evening in the dirty public room, to push about on marble tables the small sheep-bones with black dots, seemed to him a fine proof of his freedom, which raised him in his own esteem. It was beginning to see life, the sweetness of stolen pleasures; and when he entered, he put his hand on the door-handle with a joy almost sensual. Then many things hidden within him came out; he learnt couplets by heart and sang them to his boon companions, became enthusiastic about Béranger, learnt how to make punch, and, finally, how to make love.

Thanks to these preparatory labours, he failed completely in his examination for an ordinary degree. He was expected home the same night to celebrate his success. He started on foot, stopped at the beginning of the village, sent for his mother, and told her all. She excused him, threw the blame of his failure on