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A SURVEY OF EMMA BOVARY
AND
HER STRUGGLE FOR POWER

A study of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, yields an interesting portrayal of a 19th century woman as seen through the eyes of a man. Published in 1856, *Madame Bovary* marks one of the earliest works of Realism, the literary period that rose out of the Romantic period. For example, as is characteristic of realism, *Madame Bovary* deals with the physical minutia of everyday life. More specifically, Flaubert is dealing with the collective middle class and its social conscious. For instance, it is through Emma's eyes that Flaubert describes the sheer boredom of middle class life as he describes her sentiments about mealtime:

But it was above all the meal-times that were unbearable to her, in this small room on the ground-floor, with its smoking stove, its creaking door, the walls sweated, the damp flags; all the bitterness in life seemed served up on a plate, and with the smoke

of the boiled beef there rose from her secret soul whiffs of sickliness (45).

Unlike earlier authors who mostly depicted women as ornamental or idealistic, such as Sade's Justine or Goethe's Gretchen, Flaubert portrays his heroine in a more realistic light. In other words, Emma's complex personality is illuminated. Thus, Emma, though flawed, is interesting and easier to relate to than heroines of earlier literary periods.

Emma is a strong woman who is in a situation that renders her powerless. She seems unable to compose her life within the confines of the patriarchal social conventions in which she lives. Moreover, she lives through and in the shadows of the men in her life. Perhaps, not knowing any other way to deal with her limitations, she seeks to gain power by using her sexuality as a tool by which to escape her situation.

Seemingly unaware of what drives her, Emma only seems to know that she is bored with the humdrum of provincial life, and with her "simple minded" husband, Charles. Charles is a country doctor who seems content with life as is, moreover he has no aspirations for change.

Earlier in the story, it is clear that Emma jumps from a boring country life with her father into an equally

boring middle class life of marriage and subservience to her husband. Additionally, it sounds as if Emma's education, as described by Charles' mother, is one which essentially prepares her to be a charming yet refined middle class wife, "...Mademoiselle Rouault, brought up at Ursuline Convent, had received what is called "a good education"; and so knew dancing, geography, drawing, how to embroider and play the piano" (12). All these subjects were probably considered to make a daughter more marriageable.

Even though Emma had not done particularly well at the convent, her father, Old Rouault seems to think that she is not fit for menial housework as he reveals when he contemplates her possible marriage to Charles:

Old Rouault would not have been sorry to be rid of his daughter, who was of no use to him in the house. In his heart he excused her, thinking her too clever for farming, a calling under the ban of Heaven, since one never saw a millionaire in it (16).

In any case, it seems clear that as Old Rouault continues to consider the marriage, that he is mainly concerned with how much her dowry will cost him. Thus, it

would seem possible that Emma, in terms of her worth to her father, is comparable to his livestock.

Emma, though seemingly anxious to marry and escape the farm, is soon disappointed with the dull reality of what the marriage turns out to be, as opposed to her romanticized vision of it. Although she seems to be in tune with how she feels about her situation, she also seems unable to articulate it. Her social system allows her no outlets. Basically, she finds herself trapped in a marriage which took place for all the wrong reasons. Rather than succumb to this life in which she can derive very little fulfillment, she dares to consider her possibilities. She begins to strive toward some ideal, of which, in her state of naiveté, she really cannot see clearly. Her limited access to the world; for the avant-garde, drives her to take up the reading of contemporary Romantic fiction, which seems to fill her with more and more delusions and sets her apart from the folks around her.

As the story continues to unfold, Emma becomes increasingly bitter and she finds herself pregnant she is not quite overjoyed. In her state of discontent with her plight, she hopes for a boy and expresses her feelings

about male freedom, as opposed to the oppression of womanhood:

A man, at least, is free; he may travel over
passions and over countries, overcome obstacles,
taste of the most far-away pleasures. But a
woman is always hampered. At once inert and
flexible, she has against her the weakness of
the flesh and legal dependence (62).

Thus, it is clear that Emma feels utterly powerless. When she delivers a daughter, her reaction to the news is that she faints. Soon she farms her out to be taken care of by a nanny. Perhaps it is that Emma can not bring herself to nurture a girl who will likely end up like her, both powerless and frustrated.

When Emma meet Leon, a local clerk, she finds that he is also passionate about literature and they hit it off right away. Then as she begins to sense that Leon is falling in love with her, she backs away. Even though she longs for true love and intimacy, when the opportunity first arises, she seems unsure and fearful. At this point, her sense of duty and commitment to Charles kicks in. When Leon, who'd been tutoring her in piano, asks about renewing the lessons she declines saying:

Music? Ah! Yes! Have I not my house to look after, my husband to attend to, a thousand things, in fact, many duties that must be considered first? (74)

Essentially, she is expressing the same sentiments that women have had to deal with for ages. For Emma to pursue music, would be to neglect her duties to house and husband. Therefore, it seems as though any higher aspirations on her part will have to remain on the backburner 'til they finally evaporate. Therefore she suppresses her love for Leon and for all her worldly aspirations for the sake of her virtue as defined by social convention. There just is no place in her world for Emma to pursue autonomy. Her attempts to conform to her limited role only serve to fill her with bitter resentment.

Religion to seems a cohort of social convention in the oppression of the powerless. When Emma goes seeking advice from the local priest, she finds him busy and overly occupied with doing his duty. His sentiments seem to be saying that anything one desires, with exception of the basics given by God, is of little importance. Consequently, she seems to feel even more miserable after visiting the priest. Perhaps after talking with him she realizes that the church, as well, plays a part in the oppression of the powerless.

Leon, discouraged by Emma's lack of response to his overtures, decides to leave town and pursue other interests. Upon his departure, Emma begins to sink. She attempts to fight her despair with irrational buying sprees, drinking binges, and teaching herself foreign language; all of which the townsfolk describe as Emma's "vaporous airs." She becomes physically ill as these superficial pursuits wax then wane; leaving her sort of zombie-like. All the while, she idolizes Leon in her thoughts. Charles' oblivion to Emma's needs prompts him to consult with his mother about Emma. Madame Bovary Senior's simple solution is to stop Emma from reading novels which fill her head with foreign ideas that mock religion and glorify romance. It is more likely that what really happens is that Emma's reading gives her insight into what's wrong with a social system that keeps women under its thumb.

Emma goes on the depths of despair and it's as if she is not really living at all; only existing. Then she meets up with Rodolphe. Unlike Leon, who was socially beneath Emma, Rodolphe is the picture of wealth and affluence. In her extreme state of vulnerability, Emma does not possess the strength to do anything but succumb to the advances of the likes of Rodolphe. In other words, at this point, Emma

is very worn down spiritually, thus, she does not stand a chance against such a predator. From the moment he meets her, he begins to plot his advances. He tactfully speaks to her passions and desires and, in spite of whatever inhibitions she may harbor, she falls for him totally. Either her inner voice is so faint that she can not hear it, or she chooses to ignore it. Nevertheless, her instincts have been severely wounded by a social system that she did not create. With her resistance low, she is easy prey. Therefore, her involvement with Rodolphe marks the beginning of her demise. Although, in a social system such as the one in which she exists, her demise was bound to happen in one way or another. Furthermore, to conform, would be to lose her soul; her life. To break away from the social system, Emma would lose her security and her virtue.

As the story continues to unfold, Rodolphe carefully baits Emma resulting in her complete capture. Emma, having such little sense of self, totally indulges in Rodolphe to the extent of losing what's left of her soul. All the passions she'd been holding back, burst free in this adulterous affair with Rodolphe. Consequently, she begins to take dangerously compromising risks in order to be with him. In time, the passion between them begins to subside

and Emma finds herself taking stock of her life. She wishes that she could somehow salvage her relationship with Charles and redeem herself.

Opportunity for reconciliation with Charles arises when Charles is moved to try out a method for the cure of club foot. A successful corrective cure such as this could bring her husband fame and fortune, moreover, then, Emma might be satisfied by having been the one who encouraged him. She is overtaken by the opportunity for power and prestige, in addition to which she could then probable stand to stay by Charles' side. Love would no longer be important as the author sums up Emma's thoughts:

Nothing proved to Emma that he was not clever; and what a satisfaction for her to have urged him to a step which his reputation and fortune would be increased! She only wished to lean on something more solid than love (122).

In spite of her deceit, Emma desires to be good and virtuous. She still holds hope fore some kind of happiness with Charles, along with her desire to rise above her state of powerlessness. Perhaps she senses that in her relationship with Rodolphe, she is still powerless. Thus, her strong will urges her to turn back and try again with Charles.

Charles' chance for redemption in Emma's eyes, is blown forever by the utter failure of the corrective surgery. Moreover, all the resentment and loathing Emma had for him returns the instant she hears the terrible news. Additionally, she is incapable of showing him any sympathy, thus, she resolves to go straight back to Rodolphe with renewed fervor.

All the while, Charles continues to love Emma in a blind oblivious manner. One scene in which Charles is dreaming of a prosperous future and thinking ahead of their daughter Berthe's growing years, points back to how Emma feels about the oppression of women. As Charles thinks ahead to Berthe's future, his mind's eye describes his hopes and expectations for :

He pictured her in the evening by their side beneath the light of the lamp; she would embroider him slippers; she would look after the house; she would fill all the home with her charm and gaiety. At last, they would think of her marriage; they would find her some good young fellow with a steady business; he would make her happy; this would last forever (137).

Thus, it is clear that Charles truly has no idea that his expectations for Berthe are the very things that Emma,

so bravely, struggles against. It seems that while Emma has her delusions of grandeur, Charles is equally deluded in his perception of womanhood.

Meanwhile, as her relationship with Rodolphe reaches a peak, and she feels as though she can not stand Charles or his doting mother, who is paying them one of her extended visits, any longer. Emma begins to press Rodolphe to take her and Berthe away somewhere where they can begin a new life together. Rodolphe, who has become increasingly uncomfortable in this affair which seems no longer convenient for him, writes Emma a Dear Jane letter. Emma is devastated upon receipt of the letter on the day in which Rodolphe had agreed upon that they would make their escape. Again, Emma is hurled into the depths of despair. As before, when she lost Leon, she falls deathly ill with Charles fussing and doting over her obliviously. This time, Charles neglects his work in order to take care of Emma. Consequently, financial troubles, which had begun with Emma's impulsive buying habits, worsen.

Emma lays ill for months until, on the verge of death, the priest is called for. Her hope is then revived by a spiritual awakening. The priest takes advantage of her enthusiasm by introducing an array of religious literature. As with any of her endeavors, Emma plunges deep, having no

sense of restraint. Her continuous search to fill the huge void within her, prompts her to fill that space with religion in the same way she had tried to fill it with Leon, then Rodolphe. Consequently, she is engulfed with delusion again and as her passions begin to wane, she begins to see the books, intended to mold her with their doctrine, as the dogma that they are. Her search for truth is again cut off and again she finds herself being led into the social conventions that she had fought. She becomes sedate and subdued and tries to settle down and be the good wife and mother.

Trying to behave as everyone, all along, has expected her to, she takes on various acts of charity. She strives diligently and the townspeople, even Charles' mother embrace her. Although somewhat stifled and sort of brain-washed, Emma seems to be managing all right. She is giving her best effort to accept all that has oppressed her in the past. Then Charles, wishing to aid in her recovery, wants to take her to the opera in Hironnelle. Ironically, so subdued is she, that Charles has to persuade her to do something that she's always wanted to do.

At the opera, they run into Leon. In short, Leon persuades Emma, against her better judgment to enter into another romance. This time, Emma enters into her final

dance of passion from which she will never recover. At the end of her second romance, Emma and Charles are in complete financial ruin. Finally, seeing no other way, Emma grabs for the for the ultimate and only real power she ever has as she takes her own life. She finds that even her death is a struggle . After taking the poison, which she believes will deliver her a quiet, painless death, Emma suffers in painful agony until death does finally arrive.

In conclusion, it is quite obvious that Emma displays great courage. Each time life knocks her down, she comes back stronger until, in her suicide, she exercises the same courage as she had in all her pursuits. Emma is not an evil person, but truly a victim of her social system. She dares to rebel against her oppressors and makes brave attempts to rise above. She tries to conform, but her spirit will not allow it. Moreover, years of oppression keep her in a state of off-centered selflessness which lead her to repeatedly make bad decisions which lead to her demise.