

# Sympathy for the betrayers and the betrayed



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

More than would be imagined, it is sometimes more difficult to sympathise with the victims of infidelity; easier than we might have imagined to sympathise with the betrayers themselves.' To what extent do you agree with this estimation in relation to the three texts chosen?

In none of the three texts can it be said that the adulterers elicit or deserve greater sympathy than the victims of adultery. Despite this imbalance, it would be unconsidered and possibly rather supercilious to simply judge the betrayers on their actions without meditating on the reasoning behind the actions and the circumstances in which the adulterers have found themselves.

All the adulterers within the text (apart from Jerry in *Betrayal* (1978), and Rodolphe in *Madame Bovary* (1857)) merit a degree of sympathy, yet despite this, their actions cannot be wholly justified, and the characters cannot, therefore, be fully exonerated.

The savage destruction of Emma Bovary by Flaubert, and Cresseid's gruesome infliction of leprosy are certainly a cause for sympathy in both cases.

Emma Bovary's death is a painfully drawn out event in which 'she turned whiter than the sheet at which her fingers kept clawing' and 'soon began to vomit blood. Her limbs were contorted, her body covered with brown blotches.' It is interesting to note the contrast between the description at the beginning of the novel in which Flaubert erotically describes 'the tip of her tongue poking between her beautiful teeth, delicately licking the bottom of the glass' and the description post-arsenic in which 'her entire tongue

protruded from her mouth; her rolling eyes dimmed like lamp globes as they fade into darkness.’ Notably, Flaubert focuses on the body and its indignities, which is in contrast to Madame Bovary’s romanticism. Similarly, in *The Testament of Cresseid*, Henryson depicts a disease so realistic and visceral that, as early as 1841, Sir J. A. Y. Simpson was able to diagnose the exact type of disease Cresseid has.

(1) Henryson’s detailed description gave rise to at least one suggestion that he himself was a physician. The Gods marred her, declaring, ‘Your eyes so bright and crystal I make bloodshot / Your voice so clear, unpleasing, grating, hoarse / Your healthy skin I blacken, blotch and spot / With livid lumps I cover your fair face’. Cupid’s declaration of, ‘Your mirth I hereby change to melancholy’ is one of a series of semantically opposite, yet alliterative words, which in this instance, are used to display the unfavourable contrast of Cresseid’s existence before her punishment and afterwards, whilst also augmenting the malicious and sadistic nature of the Gods. In Heaney’s translation he writes, ‘your high estate is in decline and fall’. This is a reference to Edward Gibbon’s work ‘*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,’ (1776) the literary allusion conveying the suddenness and inexplicability of Cresseid’s physical decline. The bleakness of her situation is summarised in the description of her having to ‘make do with a cup and clapper. They remain’ – Her whole life has been reduced to this alliterative phrase, whilst the caesura indicates the sudden nature of her loss.

Not only does Cresseid receive a gruesome affliction, the reader is also left with the feeling that her punishment is undeserved. The reason for her

sentence is blasphemy, since ' whoever blasphemes... all Gods offer insults.' Betrayal is heavily frequented with profanities such as ' Good God', yet nothing results. In Madame Bovary, Charles ' addressed curses to the heavens, but not so much as a leaf quivered.' The triviality of Cresseid's offence in contrast to the magnitude of her chastisement displays an injustice in the name of justice, and this is borne true in the lack of consequence fastened to blasphemy in the other two texts. When Cupid retorts indignantly of Cresseid's claim that ' I was the cause of her misfortune,' one notes an irony given that all the Gods share an overwhelming involvement in all her actions and hence her misfortune. Cresseid is a puppet of the pagan God's whims, and her lack of volition means that she should not be blamed.

Fate is recurrently referred to, in for example, the lines, ' Cresseid's most miserable and fated death' (' fatall destenie'), ' Of Troy and Greece, how it could be your fate', and ' Fate is fickle when she plies the shears.' This predestination is not a problem with which the adulterers in the other two texts must face. Further, the scornfully humorous description of the Gods, particularly Saturn who ' behaved in a churlish, rough, thick-witted manner,' and had a ' rucked and wrinkled face, a lyre like lead' and a ' steady nose run' creates a further sympathy for Emma, since those that condemn her are rendered in an absurd, grotesque and humorous light. Henryson goes further when he describes Cupid as ' a boar that whets its tusks, he grinds and fumes,' since it goes beyond anthromorphism to zoomorphism; and the description of Gods that ' raged, grimaced, rampaged and bawled and

scoffed' is a display of Gods that have unlimited power and limited judgement.

Whilst Madame Bovary does not have to contend with predestination, her actions are still restricted by society's ambits and the limitations placed on women in the mid-nineteenth century. In societal terms, she has to live in the mediocrity of her provincial surroundings. It is important to note that the novel's sub-title is 'Provincial Manners' – they frustrated Flaubert, and he used Emma Bovary's disgust with her class as a way of conveying his own hatred for the banality of the middle-classes. Madame Bovary shows how ridiculous the attitudes of the bourgeoisie can be. Homais's haughtily flamboyant speeches are used by Flaubert to display the pretensions of the bourgeois. The less grandiose act by a woman who received a 25 franc award for 54 years of service giving 'it to our curġ½ so he can say some masses for me' leads the reader not to see this as remarkable, rather to see it as a sign of fanaticism, thus challenging fidelity as a certain good. Madame Bovary longs to be more refined and sophisticated than her environment allows her.

Flaubert's depiction of 'a black chalk drawing of the head of Minerva ... in the middle of a wall whose green paint was flaking from the damp' is a visual metaphor for Emma Bovary, a Roman goddess amongst the banalities of life. A recurring leitmotif in the novel is that of Emma Bovary looking 'with her head against the window pane, gazing into the garden'; it is a poignant allusion to her aspirations for a more interesting existence and also her locomotive desires, in which the garden has both a metaphorical and physically restrictive quality. Her affairs represent her both breaking out of

an 'existence as humdrum and circumscribed as that of their hens and their dogs' (2) and that she had no 'qualms about mistaking 'cul' for 'coeur.'(2)

The Emma of Betrayal has a greater degree of freedom than the other two protagonists, she, after all is 'running a gallery.' Nevertheless, it could be argued that she is a player in amongst Jerry and Robert's game of one-upmanship; their self-absorbed competitiveness being encapsulated in their games of squash (note the punning effect with the verb 'squash' and Rodolphe's remark that he will 'squash him (Charles) like a fly in Madame Bovary). This remark of Rodolphe's shows that he also gets enjoyment from stamping on other men's power, which is backed up in the imagery of Rodolphe's 'Mounted stags heads' in his study - he gets a thrill from male conquest as well as female conquest. Harold Pinter himself commented that Betrayal is 'a play about two close friends' - perhaps Emma is simply within Jerry and Robert's story, a victim of psychological determinism, rather than Madame Bovary's societal determinism and Cresseid's cosmic determinism.

Both Emma Bovary and Cresseid share an existence in a patriarchal world, which Emma from Betrayal is not a part of. Madame Bovary, for example, is blessed with artistic gifts that cause Charles to proudly display her work to whoever chooses to visit his abode. However, given the restrictions placed on women during the period, the Bovary household's wall would be the only dwelling for any art she may happen to create; this can be contrasted to Betrayal's Emma who actually owns her own art gallery and who also has the benefit of the possibility of travelling anywhere she wants (the film notes her possession of a car: making her an agent of mobility), and is not confined to

the ennui of a rustic Rouen. Madame Bovary's gender-founded restrictions are expressed in the structure of the novel.

The novel initiates with a depiction of Charles' schooldays, and indeed, starts with the ' nous' form, thus centralising Charles's character. At the end of the novel, Homais becomes the centre of attention, as his mounting successes are described by Flaubert, finally climaxing in ' Il vient de recevoir la croix d'honneur' (' he has been given the Legion of Honour'). Emma's story is therefore trapped between Charles' and Homais'; the structure of the novel is mimetic of her entrapment in a male-dominated world, and these restrictions should evoke sympathy in the reader.

Similarly, Cresseid is subject to male authority, which is made clear in the line ' Yet whatever men may think or say contemptuously,' and the traditionally accepted belief of her as being merely a lustfully encumbered individual is challenged by the way in which her punishment is portrayed as having resulted from blasphemy. The popular portrayal of Cresseid in both Chaucer's Troilus and Cresseid (C. 1380) and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida is challenged by the Testament of Cresseid (1475) and evoke sympathy in the reader.

Madame Bovary and Emma are mutually unique from Cresseid in that their adulterous other halves are base to a level which subtracts from the potential criticism of the primary adulterers themselves. Jerry is emotionally detached from Emma, yet still has a vulgar, sexual interest in her, as indicated in the final (yet chronologically foremost) scene in which he declares, ' I should have had you, in your white, before the wedding, I should have blackened you, in your white wedding dress.' He later articulates, '

you're banishing me to, a state of catatonia,' and frequently proclaims 'you're beautiful,' 'you're incredible' etc. However, earlier in the play, he makes short remarks and responses to Emma's questions - an indication that he has no real emotional interest in her. Jerry also fails to recall with accuracy certain events relating to their relationship.

For example when Jerry recalls throwing Emma's daughter in the air he believed it to be in Emma's kitchen, to which she replied, 'it was your kitchen'. When Jerry calls her 'darling' she responds, 'don't say that,' because she knows that this term of endearment is not meant by Jerry. Emma puts in a lot of effort into the affair, as indicated by her yearning for a continuation of their romantic escapades: 'you see, in the past, we were inventive, we were determined,' Jerry's disinterested response is, 'It would not matter how much we wanted it if you're not free in the afternoons and I'm in America.' This is extremely similar to Rodolphe's remark 'You're mad, you really are! ... How could we do that?,' when Emma puts forward the idea of a sojourn in Paris, and is indicative of the contrasting levels of commitment between the adulterer and the adulteress.

When they finally decide on their trip to Paris, Madame Bovary asks, 'I am counting the days. Aren't you?' There is also a link between that and Emma's question 'will we ever go to Venice?' She answers her own question in Betrayal - in Madame Bovary, nothing is said at all. Emma's desire for something more in their relationship is indicated in her wish for a shared home with Jerry. She is saddened by the fact that 'the crockery and the curtains and the bedspread' have been left for so long. She later says to Jerry 'you didn't ever see it as a home in any sense did you?,' to which Jerry



replied, ' no, I saw it as a flat... you know.' Emma correctly acknowledges Jerry's desires when she finishes off his sentence with the words ' for fucking,' despite Jerry's protestation of ' for loving'.

Emma's inability to let go of the relationship is indicated in the scene where she struggles to take her ring from her keyring and ends up throwing it to Jerry to take it off - Jerry would be happy to end the relationship. Rodolphe is an even more heinous character, as indicated in his objectification of Emma: ' This one had seemed pretty to him,' the word ' one' rather than ' she' makes her merely one of his many inamoratas.

Even more striking is when he says, ' how to get rid of it afterwards' (admittedly, the French ' elle' can mean both ' she' and ' it,' but Margaret Mauldon's Oxford translation, unlike that of the Penguin edition uses the wholly unkind ' it,' which is much more effective in making Rodolphe appear objectionable). In both cases, the deplorable adulterers create sympathy when scrutinising the adulteresses and this is not a factor that exists in *The Testament of Cresseid*. If one were to be overtly cynical, it could be argued that Jerry and Rodolphe are partly correct in their views on the affair. Is an affair really all that romantic, after all? Vargas Llosa would be quick to point out the dangers of equating lust with love. Perhaps the two Emmas are looking for too much in the relationship, and are making it out to be more than it really is.

Emma's amorous adventures activate an abundance of lies, yet Stephen Heath empathizes with her fabrications. He states that ' Emma lies, but everything lies'(3), he talks of how ' the narrating voice enters to state a distance from her, but Flaubert also cuts such statements, reduces their

number(3).’ At times, the narration drifts into sympathy with Emma, at other times it condemns her. The use of a style indirect libre causes the narration to be ambiguous, and the truth of description becomes indistinguishable from the subjectivity of opinion.

A characteristic example of this is when Flaubert talks about Rodolphe in the 3rd person ‘ Rodolphe had heard these things so many times that they had nothing original for him.’ He then reverts into Rodolphe’s mind: ‘ one has to make allowances, he thought, exaggerated declarations masking mediocre affection.’ One gets the impression that Flaubert reverts back to the narrative in the ending lines ‘ human language is like a cracked cauldron on which we beat out tunes to make a bear dance when we would move the stars to pity’, however, this is just an assumption – the non-use of quotation marks means the reader can never know when a character’s thoughts have ended, and one gets the impression that the narrator imparts some of his own reflections into the character’s thoughts.

This free and indirect style not only creates a sympathy with regards to her fallaciousness, it is also creates a benignancy by virtue of the way the narration supports her own views. An example of this is when the narration wafts from ‘ she wondered if by some other workings of chance it might not have been possible for her to meet another man’ to a sort of agreement from the narrator in the line ‘ he might have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive.’ Heath describes this free and indirect style as a way in which the ‘ the writer and the reader become Emma, are taken up in her reverie, her imaginings.’ The novel, therefore, often cultivates its own sympathy by virtue of its style, which causes the writer and reader to become one with

the protagonist and to experience Madame Bovary's own feelings. This can be paralleled to Henryson's voice of sympathy *The Testament of Cresseid*. Henryson is so derisive of the unreasonable nature of the Gods' ruling that he impulsively breaks into the second person when he declares: 'Your doom is hard and too malicious,' thus interrupting the sentencing and displaying contempt of court

Cresseid and Madame Bovary are dissimilar to Emma in so far as they experience a development as a result of their infidelity, the former explicitly and the latter implicitly. Cresseid talks about herself in the second person when she says, 'Where is your chamber's cushioned chair and screen / And handsome bed and hand-embroidered linen? The wine and spice, the supper that you supped on.' The use of the second person is suggestive of self-derision rather than self-lamentation. She understands her situation and she profoundly remarks, 'All wealth on earth is wind that flits and veers.' She also criticised herself: 'I myself will be my own accuser.'

This development from Cresseid makes her worthy of not so much sympathy but respect. Madame Bovary's development happens in a moment, which makes it more like an epiphany, thus lacking the cognitively prolonged nature of Cresseid's development. It is also a very implicit moment in which she 'began to laugh, a ghastly, frenzied, despairing laugh' after hearing the voice of the blind beggar. At this point, she realises the meaning of the beggar's words - love is unseeing (thus rendering the beggar as an representation of Cupid. Whilst Cresseid and Madame Bovary cannot be justified in their actions, their realisations do rouse respect from the reader. The Emma of *Betrayal* experiences no such development.

An aspect of the equation still wants, namely the victims. It is certainly true that the adulterers garner a notable degree of sympathy, yet it would be very mean-spirited to identify more with them than the victims. In the Testament of Cresseid, the affected person is Troilus. Although there are only 2 paragraphs focusing on Cresseid's betrayal of Troilus, they themselves being sped along by the use of enjambment, this is done more out a desire not to repeat a story successfully written by Chaucer, but also to alleviate the reader's judgment of Cresseid. Later in the poem, Henryson writes of Troilus in glowing terms, describing him as having 'beaten down, by war and jeopardy, / The Grecian knights,' and in a moment of great largesse 'past where Cresseid with lepers made abode' and 'A girdle he took out, / A purse of gold and many shining gemstones / and threw them down into Cresseid's dress.' Troilus certainly elicits a huge amount of sympathy from the reader, especially after he 'for grief almost fell down' when recalling Cresseid's physical deformations.

In both *Madame Bovary* and *Betrayal*, the victims of adultery are children. Jerry's lack of concern over his children is encapsulated in his gnomic description of his son Sam: 'He's tall. Quite tall. Does a lot of running. He's a long distance runner. Wants to be a zoologist.' The waiter in the restaurant scene is similarly an innocent bystander who is subjected to Robert's frustrations: 'where's our lunch. This place is going to pot.' 'Same glass. Where's our lunch?' Richard Martin, in his letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* argued that he sees 'not just 'displaced emotion' in Robert's aggression towards the waiter but the waiter himself as a displaced version of Judith: for she is the hapless, indeed dumb, 'waiter'" (4). Judith, the

children, and the waiter, are all correlated because they are all affected onlookers, but they know not what by. It is interesting to note that the children do not feature physically in the play, but in the 1983 film (by David Jones), the children feature in negative-consequences of the character's adultery-borne vented frustrations; for example, when Jerry hollers at his son for playing music too loudly.

This is paralleled in *Madame Bovary*, where her daughter is a victim of her infidelity. This is evidenced in the scene where Madame Bovary says to Berthe " Oh, for heaven's sake, leave me alone', shoving her away with her elbow.' As a result, ' Berthe fell against the foot of the chest of draws, cutting her cheek on the brass fitting.' At the end of the novel, Berthe makes her ' keep at a cotton mill.' The chief victim of infidelity in the three texts is Charles Bovary. Despite being unsophisticated, dim-witted and a frighteningly bad doctor (his operation on Hippolyte's club foot, resulting in amputation, as an example), he is still one of the novel's most moral and sincere characters and he genuinely loved Emma whilst she was having licentious liaisons.

Emma is often very unkind to Charles, for example, when she says; ' he carries a knife in his pocket like a peasant.' I cannot help but parallel this to the narrator in Robert Frost's poem ' Mending Wall' who describes his neighbour as ' Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.' It is a particularly significant line, since Rodolphe wields a knife at one point, and this fails to elicit the same response from Emma. One strikingly poignant scene is when Charles finally sees all the letters from Emma's lovers: ' his deep despondency caused

general amazement. He no longer went out, he saw no one, he even refused to visit his patients. People began saying that he ‘ shut himself off to drink.’ The final description of him is as a ‘ long-bearded, wild-looking man in filthy clothes who paced up and down noisily.’ For all Charles’ faults, it seems unthinkable to sympathise more with Emma than Charles. In all three cases, the victims garner more sympathy than the betrayers.

One should not nonchalantly accept the three primary adulterers’ actions as morally reprehensible; but we should acknowledge that their actions are borne out of something more complex than it would at first appear. The greatest sympathy should be given to Cresseid because her life was subject to fate; she lacked all volition owing to Henryson’s depiction of the all-encompassing control of the Gods. I say ‘ Henryson’s depiction’ because Chaucer’s original has been manipulated by Henryson such that it rapidly avoids the issue of her affair whilst also removing all her volition.

Madame Bovary represents the repressed sensuality within us, and the reader can certainly feel for her more than the prudish and monotonous environment she inhabits (ironically, it was a puritanical society that condemned Flaubert’s novel for being too sympathetic to an adulteress). It is difficult to sympathise with Betrayal’s Emma. It is true that she longed for a more meaningful relationship with Jerry, but her dedication to Jerry is severely questioned given the initiation of her additional affair with Casey. One would have to question the disposition of any individual who sympathises with the adulterers more than the victims of adultery, as any reader of Madame Bovary would attest to.

1. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/testaint.htm>

<https://assignbuster.com/sympathy-for-the-betrayers-and-the-betrayed/>

2. ' The Perpetual Orgy' (Vargas Llosa)

3. ' Madame Bovary' (Stephen Heath)

4. Letter from the Times Literary Supplement

Word count with quotes: 3720

Word Count without quotes: 2895