

# Communication: translating the written into dialogue



In Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the quest for the sublime and perfect expression seems to be trapped in the inability to successfully verbalize thoughts and interpret the words of others. The relationship between written words and how they are translated into dialogue and action is central in evaluating Emma's actions and fate, and ultimately challenges the reader to look at the intricacies of communication. Flaubert's portrayal of Emma's reading habits provides the basic framework for evaluating the way she processes information. In the purest representation of Emma's readership, she "picked up a book, and then, dreaming between the lines let it drop on her knees." (43). Flaubert uses reading to establish Emma's short attention span to any thoughts outside of her own. The book falling towards the floor symbolically creates the space for her illusions- notice Flaubert chooses the word "dreaming" instead of "reading," stressing her imaginative tendencies rather than those of a critical nature. In representing Emma's interpretation skills, her distortion of the material becomes a semi-conscious decision because she chooses to deviate from the original text, but at times her manipulation of words is more accurately described as misinterpretation. When Leon praises the entertainment value of the simplistic novels containing "noble characters, pure affections, and pictures of happiness," she misses his further conclusion that "since these works fail to touch the heart, they miss, it seems to me, the true end of art" (59). The subtext implies that she is incapable of distinguishing differences in the quality of expressions and understanding emotional depth because it is these same novels that she judges as the pinnacles of expression. From the outset, Flaubert acknowledges that Emma's quest is destined to failure because she is trying to imitate passion from material that lacks it initially. Ironically,

<https://assignbuster.com/communication-translating-the-written-into-dialogue/>

Emma seems to recognize the implausibility of the ideals that guide her actions; she “detest[s] commonplace heroes and moderate feelings, as one finds them in nature (59). Flaubert seems to be asking how conscious Emma is in forming her delusions and subsequently how this relates to her accountability. Charles provides a comic foil for Emma’s inability to comprehend the “undefinable sentiments of love which she [tries] to construct from the books she read[s]” (206). He may undertake more serious reading endeavors such as “La Ruche Medicale,” but his more pronounced inability to interpret or even comprehend anything let alone stay awake “five minutes” demonstrates a more primitive version of Emma’s delusional state of dreaming (44). The second time Charles’ embarks on a “reading assignment” about how to perform surgery he can not even pronounce the scientific terminology about how to describe the medical deviations of the foot (125). Flaubert suggests that the words may run through a man’s mind but to be able to understand them in a relational context, comprehension, and pronounce them, expression, represents the challenges of the interpretive process. Charles’ mutilation of his patient embodies the distortion which the human mind creates in the interpretive process. By illustrating the difficulty in translating ideas between the different mediums of writing, speech and thought, Flaubert partially exonerates human beings for the inevitable distortion. Emma expresses the incompatibility of thoughts and words in describing her conversations with Leon: “they sometimes stopped short of revealing their thoughts in full, and then sought to invent a phrase that might nevertheless express it.” (168). Humanity appears doomed to live an existence in which “the human tongue is like a cracked cauldron on which we beat out tunes” (138). The incongruity of this

<https://assignbuster.com/communication-translating-the-written-into-dialogue/>

metaphor reinforces the imperfect process of using words as the conduit for communication. Perhaps Leon's "indifference to the vibrations of love whose subtleties he could no longer distinguish" suggests that repeated exposure to highly emotional material ultimately desensitizes man's powers of interpretation (211). Emma's appetite for "lurid novels where there would be scenes of orgies, violence, and bloodshed" (210) allows the audience to examine the consequences of exposure to extreme literature. The explosive action in fiction contrasts with the more monotonous activities of daily life, helping to explain why Emma begins to find "in adultery all the platitudes of marriage" (211). Emma seems quite capable of digesting the emotionally vacant, didactic instructions contained in her reading of fashion. Her ability to hang curtains according to the latest custom suggests that she can process clear and directive texts which allow little room for deviation from the author's intent; yet she errs in reading novels as vehicles of the same instructional purpose. Flaubert implicitly suggests that the novel as a genre can be harmful if it overwhelms the senses to the point that they are dulled both in interpretation of the written word and life. He subtly creates the space for the reader to come to this conclusion by ironically making the story of Emma's hysterics and tragedy seem uneventful, thus allowing the reader to better evaluate their use in the novel. Leon frames this issue when he asks, "Where could she [Emma] have learnt this corruption so deep and well masked as to be almost unseizable?" (201). Perhaps one might even be able to transfer some of the responsibility to novelists, the manufacturers of "this corruption" (201) that makes her insensitive to the extremes of emotion and action. Flaubert reminds us throughout that Emma makes a conscious decision to expose herself to romantic fiction. Even when she is advised to

<https://assignbuster.com/communication-translating-the-written-into-dialogue/>

direct her attentions elsewhere when facing medical difficulties, “ she prefers always sitting in her room reading (59). As Emma derives all of her visions of an ideal world from the flat constructs of a page, the shallowness of the inspiration pervades her character. Literary imagery and cliches saturate Emma’s conception of love, suggesting that her thoughts are little more than abstractions of that which she reads on the page. Love, she thought, must come suddenly, with great outbursts and lightning — a hurricane of the skies, which sweeps down on life, upsets everything, uproots the will like a leaf and carries away the heart in an abyss (71). Despite Emma’s search for eternal passion, the banality of her thoughts and failure to evolve beyond this dream prevent her from actually developing into a round character. Flaubert communicates to the reader by forcing him to watch Emma act out the same hopeless romantic vision with Charles, Leon, and Rodolphe and ultimately creates a scathing warning against living life through a novel. Emma’s physical state during pregnancy in which she was “ filling out over her uncorseted hips” (62) creates a dimensional contrast to the flatness of “ her affection” for her baby which “ was perhaps impaired from the start” (63). Though Emma’s inability to interpret the emotional gravity of new life and the potential for new love suggests a deficit in her reading of life, Flaubert even implies her an innate disability in appropriate expression. Such a suggestion which might create sympathy for Emma, if she were not aspiring to be “ the mistress of all the novels, the heroine of all the dramas, the vague she of all volumes of verse” (192). The consciousness with which she undertakes her goals creates a responsibility for her actions which an innate dullness or flatness of character can not excuse. Through letters Flaubert illustrates how Emma’s literal interpretation of the novels results in

<https://assignbuster.com/communication-translating-the-written-into-dialogue/>

a consciousness that blurs the spheres of reality and fiction. Emma writes letters which are inspired by “ a phantom fashioned out of her most ardent memories, of her favorite books, her strongest desires,” (211) and only in these “ vague ecstasies of imaginary love” (212) is she able to find fulfillment, suggesting that Emma’s happiness will always be trapped by the confines of the page and her imagination. Letters provide an interesting vehicle to explore Emma’s attempt to express her herself. They represent her conscious attempt to capture the thoughts she has derived from the words of another on a page and raise an interesting question about how the ability to express emotions relates to one’s ability to interpret them. Again, Flaubert holds Emma accountable for her delusions because she recognizes the “ fall back to earth” (211). Her insincere motivations for writing Leon to keep “ with the notion that a woman must write to her lovers” further erodes any compassionate response from the audience (211). The motif of reading extends to the readers’ relationship to the text of *Madame Bovary*; Emma can be seen as both Flaubert as an author and as a representative reader of the work. It has been documented that Flaubert would lose touch with reality just as Emma does throughout the writing of the work; he would become so involved in his heroine’s plights that he often became physically ill. This strong identification with her as a character suggests Emma’s battles mirror his struggle as an author. Both search for ultimate expression facing the constraints of reality within a finite combination of words. In trying to bridge the gap between romantic visions and expressing them in real life, the words or the actions are always an inferior derivative of true feeling because “ the variety of feelings are all hidden within the same expressions” (138). His exploration of Emma’s delusions could represent his fear that his audience is

<https://assignbuster.com/communication-translating-the-written-into-dialogue/>

missing the message of his work, which is grounded in reality. Emma represents the innate frailties of a reader that will always distort how his message is received. Flaubert's acknowledgement of the struggle for understanding between sender and receiver as represented in Emma challenges us to evaluate her interpretive abilities and more intimately, forces us to ask questions about our own readership. Just as he holds Emma accountable for any consequences of her interpretation and expression, he seems to be asserting that both he and the audience must accept mutual responsibility for the interpretation of the text.