

Middle-class morality

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, published in 1857, expresses his dislike of the French bourgeoisie. He mocks anyone not upper class declaring that they have no firm morals and survive solely on Romanticism. Flaubert uses literary techniques such as diction, figurative language, and syntax to openly criticize the middle class for abandoning their morals when it becomes convenient and beneficial for them.

Flaubert utilizes powerful diction to criticize the feelings of the middle class as they abandon their morals, finding that it can advance their place in the social caste. Emma Bovary, the protagonist of the novel, is in desperate need of money to pay a debt. In search of money she visits a notary of the town, when he desires sexual favors in return she accuses him of "taking shameless advantage of [her] distress... [She] is to be pitied- not to be sold" (Flaubert 280). Soon after, Flaubert mocks her for this statement as she voluntarily turns to thoughts of prostitution when she has previously declared that it is beneath her. Emma is unknowingly describing herself as "shameless", subsequently abandoning her integrity when she feels it is needed. Afterwards, as part of her outrage and disgust at the thought of prostituting herself she launches into several invectives, exclaiming "What a wretch! What a scoundrel! What an infamy!" (280). Her strong application of "wretch", "scoundrel", and the "infamy" of his suggestions are a passionate response to the attack on her virtue, however, these words will perfectly describe her own personage a few pages further. She had not previously thought to use her attractiveness to men as a means of monetary advancement but now realizes that abandoning the morals she had hitherto believed is beneficial to her. Flaubert offers another view of the lack of

morals found in the middle class as Emma quickly alters her opinion of what is right and wrong after accusing another of having no integrity. Then, not only is Emma easily swayed in her stance of what is right, she begins to feel inferior to those who have managed to maintain their morals. The “thought of [her husband’s] superiority to her exasperated her” (281) and drove her to abandon her distaste for prostitution in order for her to feel more in control of her own destiny. Through the word “superiority” Flaubert points to the fact that those with high morals and integrity are superior and have strength and class that those of middle class society do not have because of their pursuit of power and advancement. The diction used in this passage to describe Emma and her feelings illustrates Flaubert’s low opinion of the proletariat that surrounded him as they disposed of their morality for what they believed to be better circumstances.

Gustave Flaubert’s implementation of figurative language is an attempt to point out the flawed morals of the French Bourgeoisie, as they struggle to claim status and wealth.. He believes that those of the upper class can overcome all obstacles without lowering their standards and contrasts this with the middle-class citizens who are smothered with problems and difficulties yet fail to maintain their values. Emma feels bombarded by “a thousand blandishments” (280) as the notary attempts to gain her affections. Exaggeration is used here to exhibit how overwhelmed Emma feels and the heights to which she is willing to climb to escape her seducer. The author portrays the middle class of this novel as petty and wavering in their values, even willing to abandon them for money and flattery. Next, while Emma continues on her quest to find money, as well as save her home

and reputation she goes against her previous beliefs of moral behavior, “ not in the least conscious of her prostitution” (284). Though she has just declined an offer that may have paid her debts, the situation was not in her favor so she proceeds to solicit herself in a manner that was previously disgusting to her. Emma’s ironic actions illustrate the ridiculousness of the choices of the middle class and their willingness to abandon morality. Emma is disgusted by the men that she feels make it necessary for her to offer herself up to them. She “ walked...searching the empty horizon...rejoicing in the hate that was choking her” (281). The personification of the “ hate that was choking her” reveals how trapped Emma feels by her situation and the hate she feels around her. With this trapped feeling comes desperation and an intense desire to remove herself from it, no matter the cost. Emma, throughout the novel, occasionally returns to her basic Christian beliefs and attempts to stay faithful. However, by the end of the novel, Emma perceives her Romantic views of life and status in life as more valuable to her than the standards she once held. This demonstrates Flaubert’s feeling that the middle class felt that bettering their situation and finding acceptance in society was more important than maintaining their morals.

The syntax Flaubert employs in this passage also demonstrates the desperation and loss of morals that Emma experiences at this point in her degradation. The lengthy asyndeton he utilizes allows the reader to comprehend the lack of control Emma is feeling over her own life as she is overwhelmed by her situation. She “ at last, weary of waiting, assailed by fears that she thrust from her, no longer conscious whether she had been here a century or a moment, she sat down in a corner, closed her eyes”

(284). In an attempt to gain stability in her life as well as lessen the intense stream of consciousness plaguing her mind, Emma forgoes her values becoming an amoral person simply because of the middle-class in which she was placed. In this scene, Flaubert finally allows his audience to see that the moral choices of the bourgeois were the only means through which they could control their situation and advance in society. Emma becomes even more desperate when she discovers that her Romantic views and plans for life have failed. A syntactical anomaly also appears in this passage, surrounded by lengthy sentences with little or no conjunctions. Emma's mood is altered as " a spirit of warfare transformed her" (281). Emma had previously only slightly acted upon her feelings of inferiority within society and now she chooses a dark path of immorality and poor decisions. This short sentence clearly points out the quick decision Emma has made in wavering from her prior beliefs. Flaubert deliberately makes this sentence stand out in an effort to display his negative opinion of Emma's reactions to her situation. Using this syntax, Flaubert is able to demonstrate his distaste for members of the middle-class, such as Emma Bovary, who choose to live without morals, trying to gain control of their miserable lives and advance socially.

Gustave Flaubert depicts the French Bourgeoisie as spineless people who are willing to sacrifice their morals and class for money and position. He portrays Emma Bovary in this light, revealing his views for the rest of the proletariat such as her and the citizens of her town. They are depicted as viewing the world around them with Romantic ideas and living without moral consequences. Using various literary techniques such as diction and

figurative language, Flaubert effectively demonstrates the lack of morality apparent in the middle-class as its members waver from their beliefs, consistently choosing wealth and recognition over a sense of values.