

The downfall of madame bovary



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Flaubert utilizes the character of the blind beggar to mirror Emma's descent into corruption. Typical of Flaubert's realist style, the beggar is described in detail as a needy, terrifyingly ugly man, which reflects Emma's inner state. Emma has been needy for "true" love and happiness all her life, and in her search for it her thoughts and actions turn truly ugly. Moreover, she also lacks insight into her own moral behavior, which is mirrored in the blind figure of the beggar. Emma spends herself into debt and poverty without care, the state the beggar occupies. Flaubert purposefully includes the beggar to undoubtedly link Emma and him in the reader's mind. The beggar seems almost prescient; his foreshadowing presence becomes more prominent in the novel as Emma's situation becomes more and more uncontrollable. Thus, the blind beggar is Emma's character foil in *Madame Bovary*. Yet Homais in many ways is a character analogous to Emma. The blind beggar is his antithesis too, as a diseased outcast whom Homais looks down upon. Homais cannot cure the man's blindness, which threatens to ruin his reputation and belief in scientific progress. Both Homais and Emma are ignorantly wrapped up in their own lofty ideals and fantasies, and are blinded by the reality of their lives. Even Charles is duped and figuratively blind to his own wife's transgressions. The beggar is thus a bitter, hyper-realistic reminder of a plagued, imperfect world that neither Emma or Homais can escape, and his physical blindness is a powerful, ironic symbol in the novel, as it represents the metaphorical blindness of these characters to their situations.

The blind beggar shows up in the third part of the novel, when Emma is coming home from seeing Leon. His hideous state offends the travelers in

the Hirondelle as they pass from Rouen into Yonville. In this passage, Flaubert describes the beggar's bloodshot eyes, and uses fabric metaphors to describe his loose, sagging skin. There is a special emphasis placed on the beggar's eyes, when " il le retirait, il découvrait, à la place des paupières, deux orbites béantes tout ensanglantées. La chair s'effiloquait par lambeaux rouges, - et il en coulait des liquides qui se figeaient en gales vertes jusqu'au nez, dont les narines noires renflaient convulsivement. Pour vous parler, il se renversait la tête avec un rire idiot ; - alors ses prunelles bleuâtres, roulant d'un mouvement continu, allaient se cogner, vers les tempes, sur le bord de la plaie vive" (340). The man is horrifyingly ugly, in sharp juxtaposition to Emma's beauty. Throughout the novel however, the narrator places a specific focus on Emma's eyes: " Ce qu'elle avait de beau, c'étaient les yeux : quoiqu'ils fussent bruns, ils semblaient noirs à cause des cils, et son regard arrivait franchement à vous avec une hardiesse candide" (74), yet as the novel progresses, and Emma's decisions become morally unsound, her eyes darken to black. During her affair with Rodolphe they are often narrowed: " Emma fermait à demi les paupières pour reconnaître sa maison," (225) and later, " Rodolphe l'interrompait par ses baisers; et elle lui demandait, en le contemplant les paupières à demi closes, de l'appeler encore par son nom et de répéter qu'il l'aimait" (230). Emma's half-closed eyes during her affair are a metaphor for her blindness to reality. Rodolphe clearly doesn't love her, yet she lacks the insight to see that he is only interested in a sexual relationship, and only values her for her physical attributes. Charles is the only man who truly cares for her, yet Emma fails to see this; in a way she is just as blind as the beggar.

Emma's disgust with the blind beggar reveals her moral and psychological deterioration. Emma at first appears ignorant and blind to her own ruin, an obvious comparison to the blind man. She spends over 8, 000 francs, yet is "ne s'inquiétait pas plus de l'argent qu'une archiduchesse" (357). She regards the beggar with absolute repugnance, and even appears afraid of his presence: "Elle se retirait avec un cri" (340), perhaps because he represents poverty, disease, and ugliness, all which do not exist in her vision of a romantic, aristocratic life. However as the beggar sits on the streets in rags, penniless, Emma's anxiety over her current affairs deepens. His voice "descendait au fond de l'âme comme un tourbillon dans un abîme" and transports her to "les espaces d'une mélancolie sans bornes" (340). Clearly she fears the blind man because he stands as a living threat to her dreams; the exact opposite of what she desires and feels entitled to, which is an idea that haunts her. In an ironic moment Emma, "prise de dégoût, lui envoya, par-dessus l'épaule, une pièce de cinq francs. C'était toute sa fortune" (374). Here, despite being flat broke, she stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the similarity in her and the beggar's situation. She is still pretending, and clearly full of fear as, "Le spectacle des objets connus qui défilaient devant ses yeux peu à peu détournait Emma de sa douleur présente. Une intolérable fatigue l'accablait, et elle arriva chez elle hébétée, découragée, presque endormie" (374). While Emma constantly tries to escape her reality, the beggar, on a symbolic level, represents her inability to do so, and subsequently the real-life consequences of her attempted transcendence of the normal world into the romantic world of her novels.

The song the beggar sings is a powerful and important device in the novel, as it reveals Emma's moral consciousness and ridiculousness of her romantic ideals. The song's meaning and diction stand in sharp contrast to the beggar's personal situation (he sings of happy things like "des oiseaux, du soleil et du feuillage" (340) even though the public shuns him as "un pauvre diable vagabondant." (340) Emma's romantic ideals are fantastical and unrealistic, which Flaubert juxtaposes with the ugly, obscene description of the beggar with his decaying skin. Her longing for a magical, idealized existence is ironized through the image of the beggar, someone who would certainly not exist in Emma's perfect, aristocratic world. It is not a coincidence that the beggar shows up as she returns from visiting Leon. He sings about a girl dreaming of love: "Souvent la chaleur d'un beau jour / Fait rêver fillette à l'amour," (340), which is most certainly meant to represent Emma and her dreamy, romantic trysts. The blind man, however, is the antithesis of Emma's dream world, as his ugly, beggared presence is a reminder of a lower-class, peasant reality. Although the beggar is hideous, and the pitch of his voice is horrible, there is a certain beautiful quality to his words. Flaubert directly mirrors this contrast between beauty and ugliness in Emma. She certainly is beautiful, yet her inner moral compass decays just like the blind man's skin. Flaubert collides this unflinching, real-world image of the beggar with Emma's fantastical ideals to show the incompatibility of the two.

For Homais, his inability to cure the beggar's ailments reveals his medical ineptitude, and poses a threat to his reputation. Homais obsesses over ridiculous notions of science and treats medicine as a cure-all for everything

in society that he finds unpleasing, even social problems such as poverty. Yet as a mere pharmacist rather than a doctor, he is actually unfit to treat anyone; he is blind to his own form of stupidity however. We see with Hippolyte just how dangerous Homais' foolhardy belief in far-fetched science is, and the disastrous results that stem from his overreaching behavior acting as an informed doctor, instead of the simple pharmacist he is. Homais believes that the cure for the blind man involves a new diet and a salve, and attempts to use a "pommade antiphlogistique" (374) on the beggar that has no effect. When it doesn't work, and the beggar informs everyone of his incompetence, Homais seeks to commit the beggar to an asylum to protect his reputation. He states "Sommes-nous encore à ces temps monstrueux du Moyen Age, où il était permis aux vagabonds d'étaler par nos places publiques la lèpre et les scrofules qu'ils avaient rapportées de la croisade?" (419). The narrator describes Homais' motivation, stating, "dans l'intérêt de sa propre réputation, voulant s'en débarrasser à toute force, il dressa contre lui une batterie cachée, qui décelait la profondeur de son intelligence et la scélératesse de sa vanité." (418). Flaubert uses the word "scélératesse" to show Homais wickedness and diabolical nature when it comes to advancing himself in society, at the cost of others. The beggar served as a living example of disease which Homais could not cure due to his idiocy and lack of medical ability, so he has the beggar incarcerated to keep his selfish desire for esteem alive.

One of the most critical scenes in the novel is while Emma lies dying, as the beggar's song is last thing she hears before dying. Flaubert uses this final passage to cement the connection between the blind man and Emma. In her

last moments, she “ se mit à rire, d’un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré, croyant voir la face hideuse du misérable” (401), and thus comes to the realization that the blind man was truly the antithesis to her grand illusions of an utmost romantic, exciting, and contented life. As Emma is in her last moments, convulsing, she hears the blind man sing “ Il souffla bien fort ce jour-là, Et le jupon court s’envola!” (401). This directly alludes to Emma’s situation, as the petticoat flying away shows Emma’s loss of innocence, in comparison to the first, dreamy lines of the song. Flaubert couples this loss of innocence with intense corruption; as Emma continued on the path of adultery, she ends up spending lavishly and running her family into ruin, and finally loses her last ounce of self-respect when she begs Guillamin and Leon for money, and attempts to seduce Binet and Rodolphe to escape financial ruin. Emma’s remaining innocence is lost because of her desperation, just like Nanette’s petticoat. While the song starts off with an innocent girl, it progresses into a song about promiscuity. Likewise, Flaubert takes the reader on a journey down Emma’s moral path. In the beginning of the novel, she appears pure and beautiful, yet by the end we see her become an adulterous, pathological liar. To escape her woes, Emma thinks suicide is the easiest, most romantic solution, yet her death is incredibly drawn-out and horrid. The beggar’s presence in Emma’s death scene once again solidifies the discrepancy between Emma’s romantic ideals and the bitter truth of reality.

Flaubert continuously suggests in the novel that there is strength in deformities; they do not have to be limiting. While Hippolyte was perfectly able to work with his clubfoot before the disastrous operation, the blind

beggar is inadvertently insightful and carries much wisdom despite his impairment. Although he appears to be an idiot, the beggar correctly predicts Emma's future through his song. Emma transforms from an innocent young woman into a liar and a cheater, which she rarely feels remorse for. Flaubert uses the character of the beggar to foreshadow Emma's ruin, and thus promotes the idea that although blind, perhaps the beggar has surprisingly more insight than Emma or Homais.

In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert features the character of the blind beggar to reveal the degradation of Emma's and Homais' romanticized ideals in the novel. Both characters have an idealized perception of the world around them. Emma wants to believe that the romantic vision of life present in her fiction novels actually exists, and she eventually dies trying to create it. Homais, on the other hand, pretends he is a doctor despite being only a pharmacist, and through this wishful thinking he harms other individuals in the novel. Both characters, and even Charles, are blind to their situations through their own forms of idiocy. Flaubert's use of rich detail complements his realist style, and his novel seems to suggest that only harm can come from attempting to escape reality.