

Victim of greed



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Flaubert, a novelist with a seething disdain for the Bourgeois lifestyle, uses his works to illustrate the flaws he sees in society, and more specifically the flaws he sees in this new, materialistic middle class. In his novel, *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert follows the life of the namesake character, Madame Emma Bovary, in her pursuit of romantic and passionate love- with her endeavors being halted and eventually made deadly due to an unfulfilling marriage, societally dictated female subservience, and the destructive habits of the Bourgeois lifestyle. Understanding these troubling topics to be immensely important to the author, many readers assume that Emma herself is the most subjugated character in the text; representing a woman oppressed by society, and destroyed by the greed that this new middle class perpetuates. This is largely true. In observing the narrator perspectives and character interactions, however, it becomes starkly clear that another figure bears the heaviest weight of manipulation and subjugation: Charles Bovary. Husband to Emma, Charles is a life-long victim of greed (both for wealth and flesh) from those around him; becoming a means for Flaubert to illustrate how the ills of the Bourgeois harm everyone. In the following paragraphs I will examine why Charles Bovary is the most oppressed character, and how Flaubert uses Charles' subjugation to illustrate the widespread harm that comes from the Bourgeois lifestyle.

Looking first at the points of view that the novel takes, it becomes clear that Charles is victimized by the greed of those around him. *Madame Bovary* begins with a brief and relatively saddening tale of Charles' rearing. In initial readings this info dump seems to empower and humanize Charles; in more

closely analyzing the text, however, it illustrates the life-long nature of his manipulation. The schoolboy days, written in a first person plural, illustrate how the schoolboys make Charles out to be a stereotypical peasant in order to greedily differentiate “ them” from “ him”; using “ we” to unify and calling him, among other things, “ a country boy” and “ like a village choir boy” (3) in order to artificially raise their social status- an aspiration and quality Flaubert frequently ascribes to the materialistic middle class. The flashback then leaps to Charles’ ante-school life, taking on the third person omniscient point of view. Looking into the mind of his heart broken mother, the narrator proceeds to share how she manipulates Charles’ as well. “ Living in such isolation, she shifted onto this childish head all her scattered and broken vanities. She dreamed of high office...” (7). Again, through both the content and the fact it’s mother’s point of view, Charles is made to be a tool for another’s greed rather than an acting body; illustrating the negative effects that the Bourgeois sensibility has on individuals and relationships. These narration hints continue into Charles’ early romance. Briefly jumping into a third person narrative that understands his thoughts, the reader learns that Charles had earnestly and idealistically believed that love could garner him happiness and a freedom of sorts; hoping marriage to be “ the advent of a better life...(where) he would be more free, and able to dispose of his own person and his own money.” (11) As the text quickly refutes, however, “ But his wife was master.” This sentiment, harsh and undeniably true, is mirrored by the rapid transition from the short, Charles centric third person narration to the wife centric third person narration. By keeping the point of view as far away from Charles as possible, Flaubert effectively paints Charles as an object for manipulation rather than an individual. Diving deeper into the

stories that these points of view tell regarding Charles' relationship with Emma, this truth becomes even more vivid.

When Charles first met Emma, he was struck by a well-controlled yet undeniably strong hopefulness for what their potential romance could bring: “ a better life...(and) free[dom]” (11) from the manipulative and greedy women who had ruled his life before. Blinded by his eventual love for her, Charles quickly enters a relationship marked by deception, greed, and utter manipulation- punishments afflicted upon him purely for his simplicity. Looking beyond her infidelity Emma, the facilitator of said manipulation, epitomizes the flaws of the Bourgeois: greedy, materialistic, and social climbing. As their relationship continues down the road of deterioration, Emma's actions become more and more manipulative. When they venture to the ball, an invitation earned through Charles' work, Emma's hunger for increased social status- a markedly Bourgeois quality- overpowers any loyalty to her husband.

“-These ankle straps are going to be awkward for dancing, he said -Dancing? Said Emma -You must be out of your mind! They'd laugh at you. You stay sitting down. Anyway, it's more appropriate for a doctor, she added. Charles said nothing.” (46)

The degree to which Emma, fueled by a greedy desire for increased social status, controls Charles is astonishing: he says nothing to her biting comments, and simply follows her orders to the exile of a poker table. This isolated incident indicates far more than an unfortunate evening, it foreshadows the compounding manipulation to come. As Emma grows in

brazenness from the excitement of extramarital affairs, she becomes more and more Bourgeois in her lifestyle. Obsessing over material goods (yet another Bourgeois quality) she develops a dangerous relationship with Lheureux: a local creditor-gone-loan shark. Hungering to shower herself and her lovers with gifts, she takes over and eventually bankrupts her husband's property.

“-What about your power of attorney? He said. This phrase came to her like a breath of fresh air. -Leave the bill with me, said Emma. ... (with this news) there was a ringing in her ears as if gold coins, bursting from their bags, were clinking around her feet. “ (254)

Blinded by her Bourgeois focus on money and material goods, Emma willingly and excitedly robs the man who loves her more than life itself; illustrating the point that Charles is the biggest victim in the novel, and supporting Flaubert's larger claim that the Bourgeois lifestyle is detrimental to the well-being of society. These harsh realities and experiences culminate in incredibly cruel and calculated action: the distortion of Charles' reality. Greedy for excess, both in terms of flesh and material goods, Emma twists Charles' trust into her web of lies until they are inseparably connected. Hungering for escape with Leon, she finds an excuse to visit Rouen every week for “ piano lessons.” The ploy continues unhindered until, one day, Charles meets her supposed teacher.

“-Well I saw her recently... (and) I mentioned your name; and she's never heard of you. It was like a thunderclap. However, she replied in a natural voice: -Oh, I suppose she must have forgotten who I am... I do have receipts,

though. Look. From that moment on her existence was little more than a tissue of lies, in which she swathed her love... to hide it from view." (252)

Savoring his undeserved trust Emma manages to contort obvious truth, from the fake piano teacher to discovered love letters, until Charles fails to- or refuses to- see the infidelities that scream out at him. This brutal manipulation once again provides Emma with what she craves, extramarital romance and extravagance, and explicitly illustrates Flaubert's intentions: to highlight that Charles is the most subjected character, and that the effects of the Bourgeois lifestyle are detrimental to whomever they touch.

Even after his financial ruin and the postmortem discovery of Emma's unfaithfulness, Charles dies deeply in love with Emma. Afflicted with subjugation for his whole life, from his classmates to mother to first wife to Emma, Charles is a man who life has indoctrinated to accept the greed-based manipulation by those around him; tragically making him the greatest victim in all of Madame Bovary. This proneness to manipulation mixed with Emma's Bourgeois sensibilities lead to disastrous effects: the death of both Charles and Emma, and the total ruin of their daughter. This tragic text extends far beyond the realm of sad fiction; it acts as a cautionary tale on the detrimental effects of the Bourgeois sensibility. By making Charles the greatest victim of the novel, Flaubert illustrates the truth that that the Bourgeois lifestyle will bring vices and ruin to all whom it touches. Charles Bovary is a victim of the Bourgeois lifestyle. Charles Bovary is a victim of greed.