

# Madame bovary neither glorifies nor punishes adultery essay



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Madame Bovary was written in 1857 in a time of great social unrest in France. The Revolution in 1772 had led to some movement towards the establishment of equality between the sexes, however, this was to be temporarily abolished with the re-introduction of the monarchy and women's roles within society were redefined once more. The authorisation of divorce in 1792 was also eradicated at the beginning of the Restoration in 1816 and was not reinstated until 1884. Women were seen as pure and obedient, upholding the moral fibre of society. As Heath says:

Marriage and the family are sacrosanct and women, whose position regresses with the bourgeois tightening of the forms of these institutions are the sacrosanct figure of their achievement, the linchpin of the religion and the morality they supposedly embody with their purity. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, in this dawn of a new political era, marriage was an extremely prevalent theme of popular literature and consequently the issue of adultery was frequently approached. Another novel by Feydeaus, one of Flaubert's contemporaries, entitled "Fanny" told of an adulterous liaison in extremely graphic detail.

However, despite the sexual subtlety of Madame Bovary, Flaubert was prosecuted when it was published for, as David Roe cites "an outrage to morals and religion." <sup>2</sup> The trial of Flaubert was divided into the prosecution claiming glorification of adultery and the defence claiming condemnation of adultery, however, the case was acquitted finally. The problem which lay behind this mass outrage was that Flaubert did not appear to be making a personal moral judgement and providing an outright condemnation of adultery.

English novelists of the time, such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens were offering moral guidance, and Flaubert lacked this trait in his writing. Added to this was the fact that Emma Bovary is a woman and has two adulterous affairs which was seen as extremely controversial. However, Flaubert was basing his pretext for the novel on real life and a true story and using the theme of adultery to reflect a social realism, therefore illustrating the mediocrity of lower middle class provincial life through the individual within society and the inferior status of women.

Flaubert himself indulged in several adulterous affairs, yet despite this he appeared to live a reclusive and lonely life, making it difficult for the reader to ascertain whether he endorsed the practice. Madame Bovary lacks recriminations for adultery and this was seen as glorification of it. However, as will be shown, Flaubert was neither glorifying nor punishing adultery, rather documenting the status of women and prevailing attitudes of the day in a realist approach to the novel.

In his principle character, Emma Bovary, we see a subversion of current values and a disregard for the morality which the establishment was desperately striving to uphold. She half-heartedly flirts with religion as a young girl and confuses it with romantic love, indeed we are told that: The metaphors of betrothed, spouse, heavenly lover, marriage everlasting, that recur in sermons, awoke in the depths of her soul an unlooked-for delight. 3 She is searching for passion and her ideal of happiness in marriage, however, we soon learn that her relationship with Charles is doomed to unhappiness on her part:

Life was as cold as an attic facing North and the silent spider boredom wove its web in all the shadowed corners of her heart. 4 Flaubert establishes early in the novel that their union is not one of compatibility, however, this does not excuse her adulterous behaviour later in the novel. Emma is a foolish character and this is clearly communicated to the reader. Her presumptions of marriage are based upon romantic literature and fantasy, as Roe states Her reported thoughts, like her actions display neither intelligence nor self-awareness. In defining Emma as a seemingly self-obsessed creature, endlessly searching for excitement, Flaubert was deliberately portraying a rather pathetic individual who is searching for her own identity throughout the novel rather than a glamorous adulteress. Charles is immediately established at the onset of the novel as a quiet unassuming man, dominated by his mother and his first wife; he is a direct contrast to the character of Emma, reflecting the conflict in society.

Even his name suggests a downtrodden man, with its connotations of bovine presenting images of submissive beasts of burden. His upbringing represents the fragmentation in society, as Tony Tanner states: What seems to be lacking, not only in Charles Bovary's family upbringing but in society at large is any principle of integration, any genuine sense of a vital, organising centralising thrust or push that might enable a growing child to emerge into a coherent, whole human being. 6

There are indications that Charles is sexually repressed, for example in Chapter one, his almost fetish-like fascination with the door-knob of the public house, yet despite this we do feel a sympathy with him throughout the novel, as Emma fails to recognise his loyalty and love for her and blames him <https://assignbuster.com/madame-bovary-neither-glorifies-nor-punishes-adultery-essay/>

for her suffering. She feels that he is a weak man, lacking in conviction and passion and, in her desperation, attempts to mould him into an heroic figure, rather like a character from one of her books.

Perhaps this is the reason that Flaubert begins the novel by describing Charles' background, in order to establish a context for Emma's marriage and subsequent dissatisfaction. This could be construed as Flaubert creating a justification for Emma's adultery rather than an outright condoning of it. However, the irony which the reader perceives is that Charles is just as lonely and isolated a character as Emma, which is reinforced at the end of the novel when he dies a broken man. In order to substantiate the claim that Flaubert is not making a moral judgement either way it is necessary to engage with the narration of the novel.

Madame Bovary is an unusual novel in terms of narration, in that it begins in the first person and changes to the third person during the first chapter. Flaubert assumes the persona of a character, however, he does not give his own thoughts and feelings directly, but rather recounts the events of Charles' first day as another pupil in the school. The first three pages are continued in the first person with much direct speech between characters. Subsequently, the narration is resumed in the third person with Flaubert assuming the role of the omniscient narrator.

Perhaps was a deliberate ploy by Flaubert; he may have begun the novel as a character that actually knew Charles in order to introduce him as a rather bourgeois character, lacking refinement, but changing to the third person to show the reader the plot rather than tell a story and also to avoid making a

personal moral judgement throughout the novel. This use of the third person allows Flaubert to affect the reader's judgement guilefully, for example, the physical description of Emma in the second part of the novel:

One skilled in the arts of corruption, you would say, must have arranged those tresses round her neck. 7 This stresses Emma's preoccupation with the physical side of love in a time when women were not supposed to dwell upon such things and her ability to deceive Charles without Flaubert condoning her behaviour. In this way Flaubert is able to portray the adulterous affairs and show a deeper concern for societies shortcomings without stating a distinguishable opinion. This is also principally achieved due to the use of 'free indirect speech' in the novel.

This can be defined as a technique employed by the author in order to blend the narrator's voice and the voice of the character in the third person.

Therefore the reader cannot easily identify a narrator and Flaubert's own point of view cannot be located in the novel. As Harold Bloom says: ... the indeterminacy of point of view fragments the narrator to such an extent that he cannot be seen as a coherent entity... 8 This use of free indirect speech can be seen, when Emma is dwelling upon marriage and her position within society: Would this misery last forever? Was there no escape?

Was she not quite as good as all the lucky women? 9 Emma's opinion and that of the narrator are combined. This subtle brand of narration allows Flaubert to make astute observations on the limitations of being a woman in France at this period in time, without actually directly stating an opinion. Emma's own beliefs cannot be clearly distinguished either, as a result of this

technique and the fact that the point of view is constantly changing in the novel allows Flaubert to amalgamate his opinion and that of a characters, making it difficult to distinguish his own.

Therefore his narrative techniques enable Flaubert to avoid personally glorifying or punishing Emma's dissatisfaction and subsequent adultery. Emma begins her predilection for adultery shortly after her marriage to Charles. Her passions are aroused when they are out for the evening and she meets a Viscount who asks her to dance. Emma's romantic notions are encouraged and enhanced by this grandiose world with its aristocratic inhabitants. She concludes from this episode that she is perfectly at ease in this environment and does appear to fit into this upper echelon of society.

Once returned to her own life, Emma begins to fantasise about belonging to this social class and this leads to depression and a nervous disorder. These seemingly psychosomatic illnesses are frequent and characterise her dissatisfaction with her existence. In plaguing Emma with nervous complaints Flaubert could be seen as punishing her for her longings, however, it seems more likely that he is indirectly condemning this futile behaviour, whilst also indicating that this wishing for a better life is a common human trait which we all suffer from at some stage in our lives.

As a result of Emma's depression Charles decides that they will move, whereupon Emma discovers she is pregnant. The move to Yonville sees Emma meeting Leon, a quiet clerk, and they immediately establish rapport, him sharing her penchant for romantic fiction. Leon appears to be a kindred spirit and their meetings are charged with an amorous undercurrent.

However, the reader cannot help feeling that Emma is living in a world of sentimental delusion and although they do not actually commit adultery, this liaison initiates the rumours in the town when he accompanies her to see Berthe:

By nightfall news of this had spread throughout Yonville, and Madame Tuvache, the major's wife, declared in her maid's hearing that Madame Bovary was compromising herself. 10 Unfortunately, Leon ultimately lacks the conviction and courage to declare his love for Emma and he eventually leaves. Emma regrets not confessing her love for him and this causes another illness. Rodolphe Boulanger, a wealthy landowner, enters the novel, and Emma succumbs to his clichéd proposals. There are suggestions that this relationship is based on true love.

However, once again Flaubert presents both sides of the coin in a realistic portrayal of the gullibility of Emma and the duplicity of Boulanger. During this tawdry affair Emma feels pangs of guilt and attempts to raise Charles' status in the village by persuading him to perform an operation on a disabled member of the community. His failure in this endeavour could be perceived as a punishment to Emma for her infidelity. However, Emma's daughter is also a casualty of this affair as she is treated with utter contempt and indifference, therefore, it seems that Emma's family are the ones who are indirectly punished as a result of this affair.

Once again Flaubert appears to be reflecting a social realism in his treatment of adultery, rather than clearly glorifying or punishing it. Emma's romance with Rodolphe flourishes, however, although they enjoy a blossoming love –

Flaubert employs pathetic fallacy and even nature seems to be in accord with them – Rodolphe fails to appreciate that Emma has genuine feelings for him despite her cliché's and playacting. He ultimately leaves her stranded and does not elope with her, preferring to write a callous note.

Therefore, although his rejection of their love could be construed as a punishment to Emma for her infidelity, it is not a clearly defined castigation, as we know that she has experienced a romance which she lacks in her marriage. In addition to this, the reader does feel a degree of sympathy for her during this illicit affair as we know that she feels deeply for Rodolphe. However, this can not be seen as glorification of adultery as we know that Rodolphe preys upon her in a premeditated fashion and only uses her for his sexual gratification.

His intentions are not honourable and Emma is portrayed as a gullible fool. Emma's relationship with Rodolphe leaves her more confident despite another illness which again highlights her longing for another existence. Following an outing to the opera, during which she meets Leon again, she begins another affair with him, and so the duplicity is resumed once more. However, they both seek different things from the union; she wishes for excitement and a change in her position in life and he only seeks to gain a mistress.

Although they have both changed – he is not the shy man he was, and she has become more emancipated as a result of her affair – they continue to speak with romantic cliché's and this seems a false premise for a relationship, indicating that it is not a genuine one from the beginning.

Flaubert's description of the church, where they meet during their affair, again makes a mockery of the religion which society strives to maintain. Emma projects her narcissistic selfishness onto the religious establishment, confusing it with a romantic venue:

The Cathedral was like a gigantic boudoir prepared for her. The arches leaned down into the shadows to catch her confession of love, the windows shone resplendent to light her face, and the censers would burn that she might appear as an angel in an aromatic cloud. 11 This also symbolises her disregarding conventional religion and her flouting of the marriage vows in their choice of location. Their affair quickly becomes a parody of her marriage and domesticity itself.

However, amidst this blissful portrayal of an illicit love affair, the reader can see that it is having an adverse effect upon those around them. In the original untranslated version of the novel, for example, a comma was placed after the word carved in the sentence " Emma carved and served... " perhaps indicating something which is not clearly specified, but rather obliquely shown, using a metaphor to indicate how Emma is destroying the lives of her family. A parallel can also be drawn between the affectionate name she uses for Leon of " child. This draws the reader's attention to the neglect of her own daughter in an ironic manner: she cannot love her own flesh and blood yet lavishes affection on a relationship doomed to failure. Ultimately the maxim " familiarity breeds contempt" begins to apply to their relationship. Leon's family advises him to terminate their affair as it is having a detrimental effect upon his career and Madame Bovary herself becomes

temperamental and moody. Emma's masculinity in the novel is also apparent here.

She has adopted the dominant role in their relationship and subverted the traditional female role that she played during her affair with Rodolphe. Again Flaubert appears to be challenging the position of women in society by making Leon the submissive partner in the relationship. Emma finally realises in an epiphanic moment of clarity that her affair with Leon has become as repetitive and mediocre as her marriage to Charles and, despite her love for Leon, the freshness had left their attraction, leaving a stale duplication of her home life:

No matter, she still wasn't happy, she never had been. 12 She seems to have an insatiable appetite for romance and a constant yearning for something more, and this explains her failure to commit to her husband and child. Flaubert guides the reader to appreciate that adultery is not the answer to her problems when she finally begins to question her need for a more fulfilling existence: What had caused this inadequacy in her life? 13

Another feature of the novel is Emma's debt, which appears to increase as her adulterous liaisons occur. Flaubert does not indicate that these are a direct result of her infidelity, however, but rather a facet of her compulsive personality, therefore the ultimate confiscation of their property can not be interpreted as a punishment but as a misguided method of alleviating her dissatisfaction. The fate of Emma Bovary is death finally, and, if approached from the romantic tradition, this may be seen as glorification of her affairs.

In taking her own life she leaves Charles alone to face the financial ruin she has bestowed upon him and escapes him ever learning of her treachery. However, her death subverts the tradition of beautiful, instant death which is evident in literature throughout the ages. For example, many of Shakespeare's plays display this convention: Cleopatra's poisonous bite from the asp in *Antony and Cleopatra*. As Emma's death is gruesome and extremely agonising, lasting many hours it is by no means a fitful demise for a romantic heroine, again indicating Flaubert's realism in the novel.

Madame Bovary's death cannot be categorised as a punishment for her adultery either, but rather a fate which is incurred as a result of her accumulation of debt. It can also be assumed that, as Rodolphe fails to help her in her hour of need, this is seen as a second betrayal on his part, and serves to reinforce the loss of the "real" love that she felt for him, thus leaving suicide her only remaining option. Madame Bovary was not written to either condone or condemn adultery but, as has been shown, to reflect a social realism without Flaubert making a personal moral judgement.

Flaubert does not glorify adultery, although he appears to sympathise with Emma's plight at times, she is ultimately punished although she attempts to elevate herself into the role of the romantic heroine and ironically this is her downfall. The neutrality of the narration forces the reader to make their own decisions about whether Emma is morally right or wrong. Flaubert used the device of adultery as a medium for documenting Emma's search for her identity and an escape from the humdrum existence of the petty bourgeois society she lives in.

Emma is steeped in romantic ideology; she revels in the trite novels she reads and fails to notice their clichéd notions. Her punishment could be construed as her life becoming like one of her novels and her realisation that her affairs become akin to the repetitive routine of her marriage, for as Tanner says: For Emma to rediscover in adultery all the banality of marriage, is one of the most disturbing discoveries in the history of the novel. For once in that condition, nothing literally makes any difference. And that is death. 1