

# Life of madame bovary

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## **Madam Bovary : Theme Analysis**

There are some people who, on their deathbeds, regret their lives for not having enjoyed it to the fullest and having missed on the real meaning of their lives. The issue is far more deeper than that, and Gustave Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary* explores in great detail the psychology and reason behind such wasted lives. The novel's protagonist, Emma Bovary, lives an abstracted life, full of expectations that she learned from romantic novels. She tosses away all reality if it doesn't align itself with her expectations, and thus ends up dying a pitiful death. This novel, written in 1856, marks the transition between romanticism, an idealized world governed by subjective feelings, to realism, the portrayal of life in its truest form. Thus *Madam Bovary* portrays the flaws of senseless romanticism, by exploring the psychology of a person who lives in an abstracted world rather than the real world.

Emma Bovary's childhood was filled with romantic novels where she learned of her only definition of a perfect and happy life as described in those stereotypical books. Those books however wrongly thought her that a happy life filled with love is only attainable through sublime clothes and pretty looking places. So from everything, she decided "to extract some personal profit; and she discarded as useless anything that did not lend itself to the heart's immediate satisfaction"(75) as portrayed in the novels, and she believed that "certain places on earth must produce happiness"(98). Flaubert's point was not that romantic novels are evil. He simply wanted to point out that when ideas are solely learned and constructed from novels,

life becomes full of expectations that do not match the complex reality we live in. This idea also appears in Don Quixote by Cervantes. The only difference is that Quixote was able to adapt and adjust what he learned from his book to reality, unlike Emma who expected things to flawlessly conform to her expectations. This made her ignore all reality in front of her and any love that did not resemble the ones presented in her novels, “ She confused, in her desire, sensual luxury with true joy, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment.”(200) Her novels only helped her build ideas of reality, but they never thought her any emotional attraction. This is also the reason why when she visited the luxurious castle of the Marquis, she ended up completely forgetting about her indecent childhood(100). Her ideas and expectations were all fabricated from books, she never developed any sense of moral or sentimental attachment to anything. A life based on baseless romanticism, not only lead to senseless attachment but it is also full of boredom. When Emma gets bored of her husband, she starts having an affair with Leon, the young clerk, then later on she also has an affair with Randolph Boulanger, the wealthy landowner and womanizer(90). She temporarily “ recover[ed] in adultery the platitudes of marriage” (200) and found pleasure in these affairs since they reflected the kind of affairs that happened in her novels. These affairs never lasted since her blind dreams led her to only pay attention to outside appearance, not internal motivations.

Flaubert’s language and technique also reflect just how miserable and depressing a life completely based on expectations can be. One literary device that he uses which was common in his days is irony. Throughout the book, we see many instances of irony, some obvious to spot, other requiring

more careful analysis. For instance, the book comprises opposite contrasting scenes, such as the gloomy Bovary's wedding and the Marquis's extravagant ball in Part I. Another irony includes the difference in eloquence between the Prefect's and Rodolphe's speech at the Agriculture show(109). Looking deeper, we have two sets of foils : Charles Bovary's two wives and Emma's two lovers. These foils and ironies emphasize the contrast between Emma's utopia from novels and the realistic and boring world we live in. The contrast between her dreams and reality. Another technique Flaubert uses is the chronological progression of the scenes. Although the chapters follow themselves in chronological order, the time frame between each one of them is different. In the chapters talking about her Emma's affair with Leon, time goes extremely fast and we have as much as 3 months gone by between 2 chapters(Part 2 Chapters 3 and 4). Towards the end of the book, there is almost no time gap between chapters. This makes Emma's time with Leon as a short lived pleasure. Emma's dream to be happy is only short lived since it relies entirely on expectations. When Emma is bored, the chapters are long(Part 2 chapters 3 and 12). This was intentionally done by Flaubert who meticulously detailed everything as to make it ' boring' to reflect Emma's state as she gets bored with her unhappy life with Charles and Leon. Furthermore, the author's diction and detail create a sad yet detached tone. Faubert directly describes scenes as they are happening but we do not feel any pity for his characters. For instance, the scene of Emma's death is described in such a way that we feel her agony but cannot relate to her. The best thing we can do is to learn of the foolishness of a life based on foolish expectations and flawed reality.

Gustave Flaubert challenged the idea of romanticism by presenting the simple yet deep life of Emma Bovary. Ideas about reality constructed from novels or nonsensical romanticism or senseless ideas of a utopia only lead to a sorrowful life since reality is much more complex than that. We have to adapt ourselves and accept the reality that's in front of us rather than foolishly seek our dreams.