

# Illusion and disappointment in madame bovary



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In *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert attacks all sorts of vice and virtue; his targets include adultery, romance, religion, science, and politics. The characters are almost universally detestable; those who are not are merely pathetic. But the negativity throughout the book, always in contrast with impossible happiness, is not as black as it appears. Or if the characters truly do face bleak situations, they do so out of an inability to accept a reality that was perhaps less than what they wanted, but better than they let it become. *Madame Bovary* is foremost a novel about romance, and it is reasonable that marriage should come under attack. Charles' first marriage is arranged by his mother to Madame Dubuc, an ugly, domineering woman thrice Charles' age, who is supposed to be rich. Charles' wedded life is miserable, and yet when his wife finally dies, he reflects that "she had loved him, after all" (42). Thus Dubuc, who claimed that "if [Charles] hovered near her, it was surely in order to see her die" (35) becomes the novel's first and only loving wife. Charles' mother, faced with an adulterous and spendthrift husband, "stifle[s] her rage" (30); the only other wife in the story, Madame Homais, seems to get along with her husband, but her feelings are not addressed. The single loving husband besides Charles is Monsieur Rouault, Emma's father, but his wife died several years before the action of the book begins, and we never meet her. The reality of marriage contrasts with Emma's ideas of love. In the beginning of their marriage, Emma and Charles are "happy and without a care in the world" (53). Charles devotes himself to his wife, yet for Emma, "the happiness that should have resulted from this love had not come" (55). Her expectations of life outside the farm: "gloomy forests, romantic woes, oaths, sobs" (57) etc. are nowhere to be found in marriage, and indeed Charles' happiness consists of the opposite: Emma's "comb, her rings, her

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shawl" (55), mundane pleasures. The Bovary's marriage begins well, but Emma's ideas of wedded bliss fall short of reality and doom her life with Charles. Marriage is not perfect, but not every married character is unhappy. Emma's efforts to attain happiness within her marriage are misguided, the result of fantasy. She thinks that by being a good wife she will raise her existence closer to an ideal. When she falls in love with Léon, she perceives a chance to overcome temptation and transform her life into a moral exemplum. Emma begins to raise her own child, to attend church, to worry about Charles; she tells herself "I am virtuous" (118) and in short becomes the unattainable woman of her courtly love stories. There is no reason why this should make her happier, and Emma's fantasy soon clashes with the reality of her surroundings; "[Charles'] conviction that he was making her happy seemed an imbecilic insult.... For whom then was she being virtuous?" (118). In the same measure that her marriage is less than her ideals, Emma becomes a less than ideal wife. The blame for this lies in equal measure with reality, for Charles really is dull and boring, and Yonville able to bore the strongest constitution, and with Emma herself. For example, a later attempt of Emma's to perfect her life is her encouraging Charles to operate on the clubfoot of Hippolyte, a stableboy at the local inn. For Homais and Emma to think the procedure has a chance of working is sheer fantasy, rooted in ambition for success. "Emma had no reason to think [Charles] wasn't a capable doctor" (173) except for her disgust at his obtuseness, a thought she puts aside, for it conflicts with her fantasy that Charles could "increase his reputation and his fortune" (173). Charles, who is a health officer, not a doctor, attempts a new procedure in a magazine and operates on a perfectly healthy patient. Emma's ideals to do Hippolyte just what they are doing to

her marriage; the boy's leg has to be amputated. The situation appalls Canivet, a real doctor. Medical science is just as bad as marriage, that is, it can work (Homais may be a crank, but Canivet is not), but it is fallible and even disastrous when embarked upon without reason but with absurd expectations. Furthermore, when its practitioners ignore warning signs, such as Hippolyte's swelling and convulsing foot, a parallel to Emma's restlessness and crying spells, the situation gets worse; in their disgust and optimism, Charles and Homais continue their procedure when stopping could have saved their victim's foot. Religion suffers the same failures as science, for the same reasons. The local priest is to souls what Charles is to bodies, and in respect to Emma the curé is, like Charles, completely out of his depth. "I am suffering", Emma tells him; "these first hot spells weaken one terribly" (121), is his response. The priest is full of concern for the cold and the hungry, but he cannot understand why Emma would be upset. Whenever Emma turns to religion, she expects miracles; she visits the church "prepared for any act of devotion as long as she could give up her soul there and make her entire existence disappear" (120). No wonder she is so annoyed by books like "The Man of the World at Mary's Feet, by Monsieur de \_\_\_\_\_, Holder of Several Decorations" (208), she cannot accept that religion is usually prosaic in its daily operation. When Emma "address[es] to the Lord the same fond words she had formerly murdered to her lover in the ecstasies of adultery" (208), she is trying another fantasy world that proves itself grounded in reality. Religion is like adultery for Emma, and she finds "in adultery all the banalities of marriage" (272). Most of Emma's disillusionments do, in fact, involve adultery. Her meeting with Rodolphe at the Agricultural Show vividly reveals the extent to which she is insulated by

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her illusions. As Rodolphe offers such alluring sentiments irresistible to Emma as “ I bury myself, in my sadness” (143) and “ our duty is to discern the great and cherish the beautiful” (148) they are interrupted by men carrying chairs and announcers offering prizes for best manure. According to Homais, Yonville “ believed itself transported to the heart of an Arabian Nights dream” (156) at the Show, but Emma does not notice the disparagement of her fantasies. Rodolphe, her first lover, is pragmatic and manipulative, not the romantic she imagines him. They plan to go away, or rather Emma plans to and Rodolphe does not contradict her. In the end, Rodolphe backs out, and Emma contemplates suicide and falls into catatonia. Rodolphe, who has had many other lovers, does not understand that Emma loves him more than other women have. “ Emma resembled all his old mistresses.... This man, who was so experienced in love, could not distinguish the dissimilarity in the emotions behind the similarity of expressions” (188). He considers Emma an entirely typical lover, while she, as is her wont, dreams of traveling with him to “ some splendid city with domes, bridges, cathedrals, ships, forests” (192). Emma is once more disappointed because she expects the affair to be more than it is. Emma’s affair with Léon is worse than her affair with Rodolphe, if only in respect to the debt she incurs during it. Money feeds Emma’s fantasy life, and the more she spends to be with her lovers, ignoring reality, the further she drives her family into ruin. Her delight with Léon begins to pale when he is unable to make a rendezvous because Homais has pinned him down; from this insignificant slight and tiny flaw in perfection comes the destruction of her love. Léon is fallible, and therefore Emma “ detest[s] him.... One must not touch idols; the guilt rubs off on one’s hands” (265). At this point, the reader

is more dismayed by this turn of events than Emma is. Emma Bovary, romantic and idealist, has, à la Dorian Gray, become ever more corrupt as the trappings of her life have increased in opulence. While visiting Léon, Emma would “ laugh loudly and dissolutely when the champagne froth spilled over the fragile glass onto the rings on her fingers” (251), and Léon finds her “ the amoreuse in every novel, the heroine of every drama...an angel” (251). She has transformed herself into her ideal, at least to her lover. But she pays for the rings and the champagne with her daughter’s inheritance and her husband’s present; she can only grasp her fantasy at reality’s expense. “ One evening she did not go back to Yonville [from a visit to her lover in Rouen]. Charles was out of his mind with worry, and little Berthe, who did not want to go to bed without seeing her mama, sobbed as if her heart were breaking” (260). It is emphatically Emma who creates this situation, Emma who ruins her daughter’s life, who makes her own deathbed, rushed into on account of debt. When “ lying [becomes] a need, a mania, a pleasure” (256) for her, when she runs to Rodolphe for money, “ prostituting herself” (283), or when she suggests to Léon that he embezzle from his employer to pay her debts, Emma is being far worse than mundane. She sacrifices her life, her family’s life, and her morals to fantasy. After Emma’s suicide, Charles is possessed by her spirit, but in a way it inhabited him throughout his marriage. It is only the content of his fantasies that changes. Charles assumed Emma was happy; he loved her, and he thought she loved him back. He was the only person in Yonville who did not suspect Emma of having an affair. “ Maybe [Emma and Rodolphe] loved each other platonically” (316) he thinks, upon finding Rodolphe’s farewell letter. Charles did all he could to make Emma happy, but when it came to her affairs and

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her spending, he lived in a fantasy world. When his mother protested Emma's power of attorney, " Charles, rebelling for the first time in his life, took his wife's part" (259). Any force that could make Charles contradict Madame Bovary senior would have to be powerful indeed. As long as he could believe that Emma was his, Charles was content, and he never dared recognize that she is disloyal. He cared about her, spending over a month at her bedside when she fell ill, but at the same time she fit into his dream of a perfect bourgeois life; her accomplishments in entertaining and running the house made him think " all the more highly of himself for possessing such a wife" (61). So instead of addressing Emma's unhappiness, Charles ended up unwittingly abetting her adulteries, suggesting that she visit Léon and paying for her fictional music lessons in Rouen. And if Charles is not responsible for Emma's death, he is for his own. He dies having learned of his wife's affairs and one day after his meeting with Rodolphe. Charles is killed by sheer disillusionment—Canivet " performed an autopsy but found nothing" (322). Charles' failure to recognize Emma's imperfections not only kills him but orphans Berthe, who is forced into poverty and labor in a cotton mill. Combined with Emma's spending, Charles' death dooms his hope of sending Berthe to boarding school and marrying her off to " some fine young man with a solid business who would make her happy" (192), for it " would be expensive" (191). Charles has only vague ideas of how to finance his idea, such as purchasing " stock somewhere, it didn't matter where" (191). His dreams, unlike Emma's, could have been realized if he had been willing to accept reality: his wife's faithlessness, her disgust of him, and her massive spending. Even Emma could have been content, albeit with unrealized dreams, had she recognized the unlikelihood of her ever finding " the heart

of a poet in the shape of an angel" (267). Happiness is not impossible for those whose goals, unlike Emma's, are reasonable and limited, and unlike Charles', are sought with open eyes. Lheureux and Homais, devoted to the pursuit of realistic, if mundane, goals (monopolizing Yonville's businesses, receiving the Legion of Honor), live without illusions, except for Homais' conviction that he is not an idiot, a belief that grants him obstinacy. Besides, when confronted with the fact that he cannot earn his goal, Homais does not seek solace in the idealized Church or in redoubling his efforts for science, rather " he [sells] himself; he prostitute[s] himself" (320) by courting the powerful. He tries unlikely methods, such as the operation on Hippolyte's clubfoot, only when he can weasel out of the blame. Lheureux does not scruple to practically blackmail Emma into entering his debt nor to have his friend Vinçart play the bad creditor for him so as not to " appear a bloodsucker before his fellow townspeople" (282). Both Lheureux and Homais do well, and apparently money can buy happiness; Lheureux (whose name means " fortunate") sets up his business and does not, as far as the reader knows, suffer from unquiet sleep; Homais gains his medal, and moreover his children's accomplishments make him " the happiest of fathers, the most fortunate of men" (320). To Lheureux and Homais, the world is not such a bad place. While they do have to act immorally to get what they want, they show that Emma Bovary is wrong; it is possible to be happy. The means and even the ends do not involve ideals, things that Emma's novels present as beautiful, like romantic love, but they exist all the same. Happiness is intimately connected to wealth, as Emma learns, and to be happy one must be able to deal with the minutiae of bills that confuse her



and make her retreat into fantasy. Emma and Charles cannot build their dreams on dreams of money, but the money is there to be had.