



Dreams, Disillusionment, and Dependency: The Feminist Weakness in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

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Abstract

This research explores Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as an important novel that reflects personal, social, and cultural challenges faced by women in the 19th century. By studying different translations and using feminist and historical sources, the research shows how the character Emma Bovary represents a woman struggling between her dreams and the limits of a strict society. Feminist critics like Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, and Scott argue that Emma is not just a romantic or tragic figure, but someone whose story reveals how society controls and limits women's choices. The novel shows how Emma's hopes are crushed by the expectations placed on her as a woman.

The study also looks at the historical background of the novel, including changes in French society, urban life, and women's roles at the time. This helps explain why Emma feels trapped and unsatisfied. Recent articles and online sources add new ideas by analyzing symbols and storytelling methods used in the novel. In the end, the research concludes that *Madame Bovary* is much more than a story about love and betrayal. It is a powerful work that deals with questions about personal identity, women's roles, and how people struggle to find meaning in a changing world .



Keywords: Bovarysme, Blind Beggar ,Gender restrictions , Realism

Introduction

French literature has long been celebrated as a cornerstone of world culture, reflecting the evolution of art, philosophy and society. Renowned for its diversity and depth, French literary tradition spans from the romances of the medieval troubadours to the groundbreaking realist and modernist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Among the giants of French literature, Gustave Flaubert holds a pivotal place. Known for his meticulous prose and commitment to literary realism, Flaubert revolutionized the art of the novel. His masterpiece *Madam Bovary* is a prime example of his innovative approach, offering an unflinching depiction of bourgeois life and human desire. Flaubert's influence not only shaped French literature but also set new standards for storytelling and character development, establishing him as a bridge between classical literary tradition and modern realism (Flaubert 2010, Flaubert 2023) .

According to "*The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*" Michael Tilby discussed Gustave Flaubert's pivotal role in the development of French literature, highlighting his contributions to the transition from realism to literary modernity. The author argues that Flaubert was not a realist but also a pioneer in narrative techniques, particularly free indirect discourse, which became a central tool in modern literature. Tilby emphasizes that while Flaubert was influenced by the romance movement, he distinguished himself through a rigorous objectivity and sharp critique of the bourgeois society, giving his works an analytical depth beyond traditional storytelling (Unwin,2004).



In Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the character of Emma Bovary illustrates a profound portrait of female fragility in the face of nineteenth-century French social structures. Her inner world, dominated by romantic delusions and unfulfilled desire, becomes a battleground between longing and social limitation. Far from being merely a tale of adultery and boredom, the novel is a meticulous exploration of how societal roles, literary myths, and emotional dependency shape and ultimately destroy a woman's identity. This paper explores the construction of female weakness in *Emma Bovary* through her escapist dreams, emotional reliance, and growing disillusionment, arguing that Flaubert renders her not only a tragic figure but a symbolic victim of institutionalized gender oppression. (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, Moi, 1985, Sarbas, 2020)

Biography of Gustave Flaubert and His career

Gustave Flaubert was a French realist novelist known for his precise style and profound influence, especially through his novel *Madame Bovary*, which sparked widespread controversy upon its release (Batra, 2010, pp. 1–2). Born in 1821 in Rouen to a well-off medical family, Flaubert was a frail child. He had two significant siblings in his life: his older brother Achille and his younger sister Caroline, who was very close to him but died young. His nanny Julie played an influential role in his life and later inspired the character Félicité in *Un cœur simple*, one of the stories in *Trois Contes* (Batra, 2010, p. 2).

He enrolled in the Collège Royal de Rouen in 1831, where he faced a strict educational system that shaped his early intellectual development. He began writing at an early age,



producing historical and theatrical works before moving on to philosophical writings that reflected his rebellion against authority and sympathy for the lower classes (Sevenov, 2022) In 1836, he attended an aristocratic ball that later inspired the depiction of the ball at the Château de la Vaubyessard in Madame Bovary (Britannica, 2024) He began studying law in 1842, but did not complete his studies due to epilepsy, which led him to devote his life to literature (Encyclopedia.com, 2024)

His friendships, particularly with Ernest Chevalier and Alfred Le Poittevin, greatly influenced him. Le Poittevin encouraged his philosophical reflections and even drinking, which was reflected in some of Flaubert's early works. After a long break from storytelling, he returned with *Trois Contes* (1877) , a triptych of short stories that includes *Un cœur simple*, *La légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*, and *Hérodiades*—each exploring different historical and emotional dimensions of human experience (Wikipedia, 2024) Nevertheless, *Madame Bovary* remains his most celebrated work, embodying many of his personal experiences and ideas, and marking a turning point in literary realism (Batra,2010, pp. 1–2)

Realism in literature



Before discussing the concept of realism in literature, it is important to point out the historical context that led to the emergence of this movement in the nineteenth century, as it came in response to profound social and cultural transformations. Gustave Flaubert was among the most prominent novelists who adopted this trend, as he presented in *Madame Bovary* a perfect model of realism, combining accuracy in depiction and objective narration of the social fabric. Realism is a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life.

The term refers sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favour of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life. Modern criticism frequently insists that realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a 'slice of life'), but a system of convention producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader. (Baldick, 2008, 281).

Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857) introduced a new term to literary criticism and psychology: "Bovarysme. This term refers to the tendency to escape into fantasy, imagining oneself as the hero or heroine of a romance while ignoring reality. This phenomenon appeared in literature before Flaubert, such as in *Catherine Morland* from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Writers often portray it ironically, warning against the illusions of romantic ideals. It can be seen as a modern version of *Don Quixote's* madness, where the boundaries between fiction and reality become blurred." (Baldick, 2008, p.41).



Historical Context: Women and Society in 19th-Century France

France underwent radical changes due to industrialization and politics. Transformations, especially after the Revolution of 1848. Paris became a center of capitalist expansion, with increased investments in infrastructure and trade, leading to rapid urbanization and industrial growth the French government, led by Napoleon III, supported large-scale projects to reorganize the city, contributing to economic growth but also deepening class inequalities. (Harvey, 2006, p.197) Economic development created a gap between classes, with the bourgeoisie benefiting from urban modernization and investment projects, while workers and the poor faced social and economic exclusion. The Haussmannization of Paris displaced many workers from the city's center to the outskirts, increasing their marginalization. Social resistance emerged against these policies, as the working-class struggle under the dominance of capitalism. (Harvey, 2006, p.198)

Regarding gender roles "Hence Rousseau, like Restif, was adamant that nature intended women to inhabit a different world from that of men, as the ancient Greeks and the city fathers of his native Geneva had understood" (McMillan, 2002, p.9) "The sexes were complementary, but sexual differences were profound. Man was strong and active, women weak and passive. The inescapable law of nature was that women had been made to place man. There was no corresponding obligation on man to place women, since these virtues resided in his superior power" (McMillan, 2002, p.10)

During the Renaissance period, women faced significant challenges due to their gender. They were often denied access to education and were expected to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers. This led to widespread ignorance and limited opportunities



for women in many areas, including politics, academia, and the arts. (Al Abied n.d,p.5)

Women could play no active role in public life and were excluded from adopting professional responsibilities which would give them economic independence.

In the nineteenth century, French women's lives were largely defined by marital dependence, domestic confinement, and legal invisibility. As Joan Scott notes, "women were not seen as political subjects but as moral ones, charged with upholding virtue in the home" (Scott, 1988, p.35) . Emma Bovary enters this world already constrained by predetermined gender roles that discourage female autonomy. Women could not easily access divorce, education was tailored to produce obedient wives, and inheritance laws often favored male relatives. Flaubert mirrors this social rigidity by portraying Emma's dreams of romance and freedom as tragic flaws within a system built to suppress them. Her dissatisfaction is emblematic of a larger social truth: when society stifles women's aspirations, those aspirations become destructive.

Emotional Dependency as Feminine Vulnerability

To create the autonomy, Flaubert relied on two key techniques, used with genius in Madame Bovary, the impersonal, almost invisible narrator, and Le Mot Juste of the precise, economical use of language that made every word feel necessary, nothing lacking,



nothing excessive. Through this, he achieved a narrative style that felt inevitable and true of the ideal embodiment of the story he wished to tell.

Emma Bovary's emotional dependency is not merely a personal flaw it is a literary device that Flaubert employs to explore the consequences of emotional repression and societal indoctrination. Emma Bovary grew up as a dreamy and sentimental person, influenced by the Gothic and romance novels she read in her youth. These stories instilled in her unrealistic expectations of love and life, leading her to seek excitement and beauty in everything, even in religion. After marriage, she found that reality did not match her fantasies, leaving her frustrated and dissatisfied. Instead of adapting to her married life, she continued to escape into a world of illusions, searching for passion and change, only to find herself trapped in deeper unhappiness. (Batra, 2010, p.90).

Raised in a convent and steeped in sentimental fiction, Emma mistakes passion for salvation. As Flaubert narrates, "Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken" (*Madame Bovary*, 2012, P.52) . Her disillusionment stems not just from Charles's mediocrity but from her own internalized scripts of what love must look and feel like. Unable to reconcile fantasy with reality, she leans on lovers and luxury as substitutes for agency. Literary critic Margaret Cohen suggests that Emma's dependency reflects "a learned helplessness cultivated through narrative and education" (Cohen, 1999, p.117) . Flaubert renders this emotional reliance not as an isolated defect, but as a systemic condition.

Thematic Analysis: Romantic Ideals as Psychological Entrapment



Even in the greatest classical novels, where characters like Don Quixote momentarily break free from this control, their independence is always provisional, threatened by the sudden reappearance of the narrator as a god-like figure which is an egotistical presence capable of halting the narrative for philosophical diversions, such as Victor Hugo's long digressions on the Battle of Waterloo or the agricultural value of human waste.(Hugo,1862).

Emma Bovary's escapist fantasies are deeply ingrained mechanisms shaped by cultural artifacts—chief among them, romantic literature. As Flaubert writes, “She confused the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment”(Madame Bovary ,p.38). These fantasies create an impossible standard against which reality is doomed to fail. Literary scholar Rosemary Lloyd observes, Emma turns literature into a moral framework by which she judges herself and others, blurring fiction and life in a dangerous convergence” (Lloyd, 1990, p.202). Flaubert highlights how feminine aspirations, when shaped by imagination and denied real outlets, collapse into disillusionment.

Emma's marriage to Charles highlights the conflict between romance and reality, revealing her dreamy nature and inability to adapt to an ordinary life. Instead of seeking happiness within her marriage, she chooses to escape, leading to her gradual downfall. Through this relationship, Flaubert offers a sharp critique of the romantic illusions fueled by sentimental novels and the rigid societal constraints imposed on women, which limit their opportunities for personal fulfillment. (Flaubert, 2010).

This quote may be an indication of the lack of balance in their relationship because Emma is interested in the smallest details while Charles waits for her empty-handed :



‘Emma's dress, too long ,trailed a little on the ground; from time to time she stopped to pull it up , and then delicately , with her gloved hands, she picked off the coarse grass and the thistle downs , while Charles, empty handed , waited till she had finished’’ (*Madame Bovary*, P.17)

False Liberation through Desire

Emma Bovary’s relationships with Rodolphe and Léon are desperate attempts to realize the dreams she inherited from fiction. Yet each affair brings fleeting satisfaction followed by despair. In a letter to Léon, she writes,“I want you. I want you with me always... but I know already you will grow tired of me’’ (*Madame Bovary* , P.216) .

Mary Poovey argues,“Emma mistakes the consumption of romance for the exercise of power though the men retain control, she imagines herself freed’’(Poovey, 1988, P. 89). The affairs reinforce her dependency and deepen her isolation, proving that passion alone cannot liberate a woman denied agency.

Symbolism and Social Critique: The Female Body as Spectacle

Madam Bovary is a novel that is rich in symbolism, and it is one the key reasons why it is endured as a masterpiece of literature. Gustave Flaubert was a master of using symbolism to create a complex and nuanced portrait of his characters and their world. (*Literary odyssey*, 2023) By analyzing the symbols in *Madam Bovary*, we can gain a deeper understanding of the themes and ideas that Flaubert was exploring, such as the tension between romanticism and realism, the constraints of social expectations, and the consequences of individual desire. In short, understanding the symbolism in *Madam Bovary* is crucial for appreciating the depth and complexity of Flaubert's work.



Understanding the Symbolism in Gustave Flaubert's ' *Madam Bovary*

The blind beggar, who follows Emma's carriage as she goes to meet Léon, symbolizes both physical decay and her moral downfall. His song about nature and beauty, sung in a voice filled with vague despair, reflects the contrast between innocence and corruption just as Emma appears to be a graceful and respectable wife while secretly engaging in deception and forbidden desires. At her death, the beggar finishes his song, revealing that what seems like an innocent tune is crude and vulgar. This shift from purity to degradation mirrors Emma's journey.

Suddenly on the pavement was heard a loud noise of clogs and the clattering of a stick; and a voice rose a raucous voice – that sang "Maids an the warmth of a summer day dream of love and always" Emma raised herself like a galvanised corpse , her hair undone , her eyes fixed , starting. "Where the sickle blades have been, Nannette, gathering ears of corn, passes bending down, my queen, To the earth where they were born" "The blind man " she cried. And Emma began to laugh, an atrocious, frantic, despairing laugh, thinking she saw the hideous face of the poor wretch that stood out against the eternal night like a menace" (*Madam Bovary*, P.199)

When Emma moves into Charles's home, she notices his late wife's wedding bouquet and wonders about the fate of her own after death. Later, upon moving to Yonville, she burns her bouquet in defiance of her unhappy marriage. The dried bouquet represents lost dreams and the fading hope of marital bliss. On a deeper level, her act of burning it foreshadows how her desires will consume her youth and, ultimately, her life. One day when, in view of her departure, she was tidying a drawer, something pricked her finger. It was a wire of her wedding bouquet. The orange blossoms were yellow with dust



and the silver bordered satin ribbons frayed at the edges. She threw it into the fire. It flared up more quickly than dry straw. Then it was, like a red bush in the cinders, slowly devoured. She watched it burn. The little pasteboard berries burst, the wire twisted, the gold lace melted; and the shriveled paper corollas, fluttering like black butterflies at the back of the stove, at least flew up the chimney " (*Madam Bovary*, p. 40)

Flaubert uses Emma's fixation on beauty to critique the commodification of femininity. "She felt herself as if enveloped in the silks of Paris and the glances of admiration" (*Madame Bovary*, p.112) . Sandra Gilbert notes, "Emma's self-fashioning as a beautiful object is not empowerment it is submission to the cultural demand that women speak through appearance rather than intellect" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 278) . Her beauty becomes a double bind a fleeting sense of power within a system that ultimately consumes her.

Binet's habit of crafting useless napkin rings on his lathe serves as a multi-layered symbol. It represents the excessive and ornamental nature of bourgeois tastes, the monotonous routine that traps Emma, and an eerie call to suicide when she contemplates jumping out of a window. Additionally, the lathe symbolizes the craftsman's repetitive, precise labor—similar to Flaubert's meticulous approach to writing, where he carefully refines each sentence like a craftsman shaping his work. "he had at home a lathe, and amused himself by turning napkin rings, with which he filled up his house, with the jealousy of an artist and the egotism of a bourgeois " (*Madam Bovary*, p. 45)



Psychological Breakdown and Death: Structural and Personal Defeat

Emma Bovary's tragic demise unfolds as the culmination of both internal and external defeats. Financially, she spirals into ruin as she recklessly pursues luxury and romantic idealism, believing that material excess might fill the emotional void within her. Emotionally, she confronts the unbearable weight of disappointment and isolation. Her realization that "she had tried everything and failed...She was alone completely alone" (*Madame Bovary*, p.292) encapsulates a soul crushed by unmet expectations and societal pressure. This stark declaration is not merely a moment of despair but a profound acknowledgement of her powerlessness in a world that offers her no escape or redemption.

Elaine Showalter interprets Emma's suicide as "the price exacted for a refusal to conform to a script written by patriarchal society" (Showalter, 1977, p.163) , asserting that her death reflects not only personal defeat but also societal rejection. Emma's longing to transcend her prescribed role as a bourgeois wife collides with rigid norms that punish deviation. Her suicide, then, becomes a paradox: on one hand, a symbolic act of resistance a rejection of the roles assigned to her and on the other, a tragic illusion of control, since she ends her life not in triumph but in hopelessness. The moment lacks heroic defiance; instead, it reveals the deep fracture between desire and possibility.

Emma's psychological collapse, framed by debt, emotional abandonment, and disillusionment, suggests that her fate is not simply a result of romantic delusion but a consequence of structural oppression. Her pursuit of autonomy whether through love, spending, or dreams ultimately becomes self destructive in a society that denies women



meaningful agency. Thus, her death represents both a personal surrender and a critique of the broader systems that stifle female identity and freedom.

Social Commentary vs. Individual Tragedy

Although *Madame Bovary* places a woman at the center of its narrative, Gustave Flaubert constructs Emma's choices within a system fundamentally hostile to female autonomy. Her desire to escape her provincial life to seek passion, sophistication, and freedom is constantly filtered through patriarchal values that redefine longing as sin and ambition as moral failure. Flaubert poignantly captures this inner conflict: "She wanted to die, but she also wanted to live in Paris" (*Madame Bovary*, p.271) This single line distills the paradox of Emma's existence her yearning for life is inseparable from the despair bred by her circumstances.

Toril Moi describes Emma as "an emblem of the domestic prison that literature and law conspired to normalize" (Moi , 1985, p.141), emphasizing the cultural forces that shaped and ultimately sabotaged her vision of happiness. Emma's tragedy is not merely personal; it's structural. She is cast into a social script that romanticizes female suffering yet punishes deviation from prescribed gender roles. Her consumption of sentimental novels, her romantic affairs, and her financial recklessness are desperate attempts to perform a life that literature promised but reality denied.

The town of Yonville itself becomes symbolic a space of moral surveillance and narrow possibility. Every choice Emma makes, from marriage to rebellion, is circumscribed by societal expectations that leave no room for genuine transformation. Even her death, often mistaken for an act of agency, emerges from despair rather than empowerment a bitter echo of the choices she was never truly free to make.



Thus, the novel critiques not only Emma's dreams but the world that created them. Flaubert exposes how cultural myths of romance, domesticity, and femininity are weaponized to trap women in lives of quiet suffering. Emma Bovary does not merely fail she is failed by a system that taught her to dream and then punished her for believing.

Conclusion

The novel clearly highlights the social disparity between men and women in the 19th century through the character of Emma, who finds herself trapped in a provincial town, lacking sufficient financial means and unable to escape her constrained life. Rodolphe, who possesses the economic power to rescue her from her limitations, abandons her without concern, while Emma is denied the agency to flee due to her position as a woman in a convention-bound society. In contrast, Léon who shares her discontent with rural life and dreams of the city is able to realize his aspirations simply because he is a man.

This contrast reflects a broader social structure in which men enjoyed freedom of movement and pursuit of opportunities, while women remained confined to roles defined by legal and physical dependency. Through this narrative approach, Flaubert offers a clear critique of the restrictions society imposed on women. Emma's longing to bear a son reveals her awareness of these gendered disparities; she believes that men are free to traverse countries and passions, while women, weakened by their physical nature and legal subjugation, remain bound by social norms, constantly swayed by inner desires yet restrained by external conventions.

Emma's tragedy is not just hers it is the tragedy of a woman confined by fiction, family, and fate. Her weakness is constructed, not innate; her



dreams are inherited, not chosen. In portraying her rise and fall with irony and empathy, Flaubert composes a lasting feminist parableone that reveals how systems, not simply souls, break women down.

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