

# “Treason and Compassion” in Flaubert’s Madam Bovary

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**Abstract:** The Two words that inform the title of this paper, namely ‘treason’ and ‘compassion’ are quite suggestive in the elegant sense that they actually define the stunning realities in Flaubert’s novel. They impinge on our minds the negative as well as the positive realities and magnificently isolate for us a writer who is in full control of his creation.

Emma starts by marrying a man who disastrously fails to satisfy her and soon she feels wretched. As a way out of her miserable state, she first befriends Randolph as a lover. Then she leaves him and befriends Léon only to go back to Randolph to help her financially. But he let her down. She, then, feels so wretched that she ends her life by poisoning herself.

A grief-stricken Charles, Emma’s husband, has been unaware of Emma’s financial troubles and her miserable state. He remains devoted to his deceased wife as he struggles to pay her debts. After discovering love letters from Randolph and Léon, Emma’s lovers, he becomes increasingly sad, blaming Emma’s sad end on fate. Shortly afterwards he dies. Then left alone, Berthe, his daughter, ends by working at a cotton factory.

The message of Flaubert’s novel is quite enlightening: “In writing Madam Bovary, Flaubert criticises the values of the bourgeois class through events leading to Emma’s downfall.” (1)

**Keywords and Phrases:** treason, compassion, stunning realities, bourgeois class, befriends, love affair, grief-stricken

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## 1. Introduction

Roger Clark, who introduces Flaubert's novel "talks (p. xvi) of Flaubert's awareness of the inadequacy of language and of his consciousness of the ultimate impossibility (even absurdity) of mimetic representation."

Earlier, he suggests (p. vii) that **Madame Bovary** "is structured around Emma's vain attempts, both amorous and financial, to relieve the tedium that she finds in her marriage."

Clark is keenly aware (p. xvii) that "Flaubert ends his novel, just as he had begun it, not with Emma, but with Charles."

It is Barthes, who maintains that "we know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single meaning ". (2) This is quite true of Flaubert's evocative style in **Madame Bovary**. Quite elegantly, he reveals Charles and Emma's relationship as quite hazy. He is shown to be deeply devoted to his wife whom he genuinely loves, yet being naive, he disastrously fails to understand her emotional needs and desires. Emma, dissatisfied with her marriage and yearning for a more exciting and passionate life, has to look for somebody who satisfies her. Thus, a lot of tension is created, tension that eventually leads to disastrous realities in the novel.

With a good-hearted but a dull doctor, Emma feels lost. As a beautiful farm girl, formerly raised in a convent, she anticipates marriage as an exciting and adventurous reality. She soon gets bored and discovers that her only excitement derives from reading sentimental and romantic novels.

She grows increasingly bored and unhappy with a man who seems to be solely devoted to his medical job.

Looking for a more exciting life, she starts acting her romantic fantasies, embarking ultimately on a disastrous love affair with Randolph, a local land owner. She plans to run away with him but, growing tired of her, Randolph unexpectedly ends their hazy relationship. Shocked, Emma gets seriously ill for more than a month. She, later, takes up again with Léon, a former acquaintance. As time passes, her life becomes unbearably chaotic. Ignoring material circumstances, she returns to embrace futile abstractions, a thing which makes her feel lost.

As expected, Emma's life will eventually come to a tragic end. Disillusioned and overwhelmed by debts, she takes her own life by ingesting arsenic, a deadly poison, effecting a very poignant and intense conclusion.

All these exiting details are apt to single out a writer whose work is unique as critically suggested: "Flaubert [has] transformed a common place story of adultery into an enduring work of profound humanity (3)

## 2. Thematic Concerns

The narrative events of **Madame Bovary** almost start by suggesting Emma falling in love with Charles whose happiness pervades the relevant scene:

Charles from horseback threw her a kiss, she answered with one... He went on rechewing his happiness (p. 19)

At the time, Charles is being seen with his companions laughing at him. As it is, he happens to see Emma and emotionally behave awkwardly in a scene that seems quite strange where he shows himself to be tactless:

Emma in her room was dressing; He came up tiptoe, kissed her back; she gave a cry. (p. 19)

Emma at the time gives the impression of being naive. Later, however, things dramatically change when Emma feels disappointed to have a man like Charles:

But as the intimacy of their life became deeper, the greater became the gulf that separated them. (p. 34)

She now wonders why she has married him, feeling that her life is “as cold as garrot”.

Quite earlier, Emma has started her life in a convent where she is impressed by an “old maid” who, patronised by the clergy, ... told stories. At fifteen, “she made her hands dirty with books from old lending libraries (pp. 30-31) rebelling against “the mysteries of faith.” (p. 33) The women who are dedicated to religion are pleased to see her leave the place:

When her father took her from school, no one was sorry to see her go. (p. 33)

In an emphatic sense, she is seen as being “irrelevant to the community” (p. 33)

As a married woman, she seems to be disappointed with Charles, her husband. She feels that she has married a man who “taught nothing, knew nothing, wished nothing.” He thought her happy ; and she resented his easy calm. (p. 34)

She is shown to be extremely disappointed to marry a man who is emotionally inchoate:

Why did I marry him... All men surely were not like Charles... He might be handsome, witty, gentlemanly, attractive... But as for her, her life was as cold as a garrot (p. 37)

Emma is now quite ready to have a change. Quite later, her journey to Vaubyessard, a château where she has danced emotionally quite decisive:

Her journey to Vaubyessard had made a hole in her life, like one of those great crevasses that a storm will sometimes make in one night in mountains (p. 48)

At the dance, she asks Charles to leave her “alone”. She feels elated as she dances with her partner.

Earlier a “Viscount... came, a second time to ask Madame Bovary to dance, assuring her that he would guide her, and that he would get through it very well.” (p. 43)

As time passes, she undergoes a drastic change that upsets her listeners, including Charles her husband:

She no longer concealed her contempt for anything or anybody, and, at times, she set

herself to express singular opinions, finding fault with that which others approved, and approving things perverse and immoral, all which made her husband open his eyes widely (p. 56)

Now she seems emotionally ready to have a change. The change later comes when she meets Léon and announces that she admires ‘sunsets’ (p. 68). This would be a start to have an affair with him.

To meet Léon is quite easy for Emma since he is “lodged at the chemist’s where he has a small room on the second floor”. The scene vivifies as he comes to know Emma “in the midst of his poverty.” (p. 80)

Léon now thinks that the scene is quite challenging. “He did not know what to do between his fear of being indiscreet and the desire for intimacy that seemed almost impossible.” (p. 81)

Quite later, she loathes Charles’s hypocrisy. “She was seized with the temptation to flee somewhere with Léon to try a new life. (p. 92)

Bergonzi speaks... of the image of man in the hands of Flaubert and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky which is remade with an astonishing power of freedom. (4)

Earlier, Léon is shown quite miserable.

He tortured himself to find out how he could make his declaration to her, and always halting between the fear of displeasing her and the shame of being such a coward, he wept with discouragement and desire. (pp. 83-84)

Emma contemplates running away with Léon, now her lover. “She was seized with the temptation to flee somewhere with Léon to try a new life.” (p. 92) Now she craves for Léon:

Henceforth the memory of Léon was the centre of her boredom, it burnt there more brightly than the fire travellers have left on the snow of a Russian steppe. (p. 104)

Lubbock suggests (p. 60) that “Flaubert has only one word to say and it is impossible to find more than one meaning to it.”

Emma’s health begins to deteriorate. With precision, Flaubert vividly describes Emma’s suffering and Charles’s imbecile reaction. Thus, as she spits blood, Charles shows his weakness:

Charles fled to his study and wept there. Then her wrote to his mother to beg her to come, and they had long consultations together on the subject of Emma. (p. 105)

Another phase of love starts when a man called Randolph at an agricultural gathering let his hand “fall on Emma”. Enticed by his eyes and the pomade perfume that made his hair slossy, she faints.

As Randolph’s love relation with Emma deepens, he seems to be so overwhelmed with love that he does not know what force impelled him towards her. (p. 131) He announces that she is irresistible: “Heaven, one cannot resist the smile of angels”. (p. 131) She tries to avoid his look (p. 133). He, on the other hand, tells her that he wants her for his life and to be his angel (p. 134). Her reaction is profound. She repeats that she has then “a lover” (p. 137). Then they start to write to each other “regularly every evening.”

As her love relation with Randolph deepens, her relation with her husband deteriorates: “The more she gave of herself to the one, the more she loathes the other.” (p. 156) Later (p. 160) she announces that she cannot live without him. She is now a changed person:

“She even committed the impropriety of walking out with Monsieur Randolph, a cigarette in her mouth” (p. 161).

Planning to run away to Paris, she announces total surrender to love...” You are all to me, so shall I be to you, I will be your people, your country.” (p. 165).

Randolph is quite evasive. He will be far away when she reads his letter, She will think him “harder than the rock” (p. 170). Feeling angry, she faints again and she is being carried to her bed. (pp. 172-173).

Then as a compensatory act, she gives up herself to charity, sewing clothes for the poor and sending encouraging word to “women in childhood” (p. 179). Now, she begins to give attention to Berthe, her daughter.

Booth (p. 75) likes to talk of the writer’s precision in his work of art, a thing which is highly valued by Flaubert: “Flaubert is right in saying that Shakespeare does not barge clumsily into his work.”

However, it is at an awkward stage that Léon comes back to the scene. He starts apologizing for leaving Emma: “I dragged myself along the quays seeking distraction (p. 193). Emma pities him and Léon kisses her hand. So delighted are they to meet each other that they stop speaking:

They no longer spoke... they were hand in hand now and the past, the future all were confounded in the sweetness of ecstasy. (p. 195)

Culler likes to speak of the mental process involved in writing:

Everyone who has studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as

coherent and progressive as the study of science. (Culler, p. 121)

This is, in fact, the case with Flaubert where every word counts in his writing.

Emma is shown to go to Roun where she meets Léon and, strangely enough, she stays there, strangely enough, for “three, full, exquisite days... a real honeymoon.” (pp. 211-212). Later, they meet at a hotel and embrace each other, forgetting the sorrows of a week in separation:

“Now, everything forgotten... They gazed into each other faces with voluptuous laughs... They were completely lost in the possession of each other.” (p. 219).

Quite later, Emma is shown accusing Léon of indifference. However, soon we see them at a table opposite each other. This is how a fascinated Emma reveals her eagerness to meet her lover:

... and Emma returned to him more inflamed, more eager than ever... she went on tiptoe, barefooted to see the door closed. (p. 233).

As expected, Emma’s need for money mounts, declaring that she would pay it back. She tells Léon that she wants “eight thousand francs” (p. 243)

Disappointed by Léon, she suddenly thinks of Randolph as one who is ready enough to help her:

Suddenly she struck her brow and uttered a cry for the thought of Randolph, like a flash of lightning in a dark night, had passed into her soul. He was so good, so delicate, so generous. (p. 254).

So impressed is Randolph by Emma being near him. He tells her that she has not changed and that she is “as charming as ever.” Then he excuses himself “in vague terms”. She tells him that she cannot live without him. Eventually, “she burst into tears”, telling Randolph that she is ruined, that he must lend her “three thousand francs”, and that her husband has “placed his whole fortune at a notary.” Randolph apologises for not [having] got them” and she announces that he never loves her and Ralph has to declare that he is “hard up himself” (pp. 255-256).

Later, at home, the sad picture of a dying woman, seems to pervade the narrative scene. Flaubert describes Emma’s death with disengagingly precise details:

Emma, her chin sunken upon her breast had her eyes inordinately wide open, and her poor hand wandered over the sheets with that hideous and soft movement of the dying, that seems as if they wanted already to cover themselves with the shroud. Pale as a statue and with eyes red as fire, Charles, incapable of tears stood opposite her at the foot of the bed. (p. 267).

### 3. Conclusions

To recapture things, one could safely suggest that the themes of *treason* and *compassion* are quite prominent in **Madame Bovary**. In an emphatic sense, **Emma**’s actions are often shown to reflect a sense of betrayal to those around her. Her infidelities and her constant pursuit of passion have eventually led to disastrous reality.

It is quite evident that Flaubert has succeeded in transforming a commonplace story of adultery into an enduring work of profound humanity.

Madame Bovary is, thus, considered to be Flaubert’s masterpiece and, according to some critics, it has ushered us to a new age of realism in literature.

One could safely conclude that Flaubert’s language in this novel, reworked and recorrected for five years, impresses on us its precision, delicacy and nuances.

The novel succeeds in revealing Emma as a lost soul destined to have a tragic end:

“... it becomes all too clear that Emma’s dream of bettering herself involves a great deal of self-deception that will prove to be destructive not only to herself but also to people round her. (Paris, Update, 2020).

Quite evocatively, it transpires that Emma has not only harmed herself but also those around her. Thus, we can discern in Emma’s relationship with her inner circle mounting tension. While she does show moments of affection towards Berthe, her daughter and towards Charles, her husband, her own desires often take priority. This unfamiliar attitude on her part is shown to reflect her inner turmoil and the pressures of her own time.

Surveying the narrative scenes, one is also apt to conclude that Charles Bovary, Emma’s husband, is a victim of forces beyond his control. Delving deep in the novel, he can be seen a man of gentle, caring nature towards Emma, his wife when she is at her most difficult time. Some telling instances of compassion could be seen as his wife verges on a fatal moment.

In **Madame Bovary**, Flaubert succeeds in unleashing a coherent narrative text. Culler’s words could be taken as describing, in its precision, Flaubert’s unmatched production where every word counts:

“Everyone who has studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science.” (Culler, p. 121)

#### 4. Notes

1. 123.helpme.com

2. Barthes, p. 146

3. The Darling Axe

4. Bergonzi, p. 16

5. Lubbock, p. 60

6. Booth, p. 75
7. Paris Update, 2020
8. Culler, p. 121

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## “الخيانة والحنو” في مدام بوفاري لفلوبير

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### الخلاصة:

الكلمتان اللتان تكرران عنوان هذه المقالة، أعني "الخيانة" و "الحنو" تدلان، تماماً، في المعنى الشيق، على أنهما، هنا، ثُرِفان الأحداث المذهلة في رواية فلوبير. إنها ثُحَدَّثان في أذهاننا الواقع السلبية والإيجابية وعلى نحو مبهر يفردان كتاباً يسيطر سيطرة كاملة على ما أبدع.

تبدأ (أمى) بالزواج من رجل يخفق "على نحو مفجع" في أن يُشبّع حاجاتها ولم يمض وقت طويل حتى تشعر بتعاسة، وللخروج من حالتها التعيسة، تصادق، أولاً، (راندولف) عشيقاً، ثم تتركه لتصادق (ليون) لتعود إلى (راندولف) كي يساعدها مالياً ولكنه يخذلها. عندها تشعر بتعاسة إلى الحد الذي تنتهي به حياتها بأن تسمم نفسها. لم يكن جارلس، المترع بالحزن، زوج (أمى)، شاعراً بمتاعب (أمى) المالية وحالتها التعيسة. ولكنه ظل مخلصاً لزوجته الميّتة وهو يكافح لدفع ديونها. وبعد اكتشافه رسائل حب من راندولف وليون، عشاق (أمى)، أصبح، على نحو يزداد، حزيناً، وهو يلوم النهاية المفجعة لـ(أمى) على القدر. وبعد وقت قصير، يموت. وإذا تركت ابنته، بيرث وحيدة، فهي تنتهي بالعمل في معمل للقطن.

رسالة رواية فلوبير تثير، تماماً، "في كتابته لمدام بوفاري، ينتقد فلوبير قيم الطبقة البورجوازية بوساطة أحداث تقود إلى سقوط (أمى)." .

### الكلمات والعبارات المفتاحية:

الخيانة ، الرحمة ، الواقع المذهلة ، الطبقة البورجوازية ، تصادق ، قصة حب ، مصاب بالحزن

<sup>1</sup> أستاذ متدرس في كلية المنصور الجامعة قسم اللغة الانكليزية – العراق - بغداد