

Madame Bovary / Gustave Flaubert

About the Book...

When Emma Rouault marries dull, provincial doctor Charles Bovary, her dreams of an elegant and passionate life crumble. She escapes into sentimental novels but finds her fantasies dashed by the tedium of her days. Motherhood proves to be a burden; religion is only a brief distraction. She spends lavishly and embarks on a series of disappointing affairs. Soon heartbroken and crippled by debts, Emma takes drastic action with tragic consequences for her husband and daughter.

About the Author...

Gustave Flaubert was born in Rouen in 1821, the son of a prominent physician. A solitary child, he was attracted to literature at an early age, and after his recovery from a nervous breakdown suffered while a law student, he turned his total energies to writing. Aside from journeys to the Near East, Greece, Italy, and North Africa, and a stormy liaison with the poetess Louise Colet, his life was dedicated to the practice of his art. The form of his work was marked by intense aesthetic scrupulousness and passionate pursuit of *le mot juste*; its content alternately reflected scorn for French bourgeois society and a romantic taste for exotic historical subject matter. The success of *Madame Bovary* (1857) was ensured by government prosecution for "immorality"; *Salammbô* (1862) and *The Sentimental Education* (1869) received a cool public reception; not until the publication of *Three Tales* (1877) was his genius popularly acknowledged. Among fellow writers, however, his reputation was supreme. His circle of friends included Turgenev and the Goncourt brothers, while the young Guy de Maupassant underwent an arduous literary apprenticeship under his direction. Increasing personal isolation and financial insecurity troubled his last years. His final bitterness and disillusion were vividly evidenced in the savagely satiric *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, left unfinished at his death in 1880.

Discussion Questions...

1. In 1857 Flaubert was arrested and tried for obscenity for his novel *Madame Bovary* (he was acquitted). By present-day standards, is the novel obscene? Is it shocking?
2. It's often said that the first chapter of a book is the most important. Did the first chapter of *Madame Bovary* hook you?
3. The book begins with a "fish out of water" situation: Charles the bumpkin comes to the big city to attend school. How does this early experience shape Charles? Does he become any more sophisticated as an adult? Does he fit into Yonville? Does he fit into his profession? Is Emma, as a child, a misfit too? As an adult, does she find a place to fit in?
4. What does Emma want from life?
5. Consider the education that Charles receives. How does his schooling help to shape him into the man he becomes? Consider the same for Emma.

6. Consider the kinds of material that Emma reads. How do they shape her view of the world? Consider the kinds of material that Charles reads. How do they shape his view?
7. Considering the great amount of influence that books and journals have, especially on Emma and Humais, is Flaubert condemning other writers?
8. What are Charles' expectations for his first marriage? For his second marriage? Does either marriage live up to those expectations? What does he learn from the failure of those marriages?
9. What are Emma's expectations for marriage? Why does she marry Charles?
10. What role does Charles want to play as a husband and a father? What role does Emma want to play as a wife and a mother?
11. What part do the in-laws play in the Bovarys' marriage?
12. Would Emma be happier in 21st century America than in 19th century France?
13. In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, a close look at the frustration and disappointment in the loss of their dreams that many American middle-class housewives were feeling. If you're familiar with Friedan's book, would you say that Emma is a victim of the feminine mystique? Is she a victim of anything? Would you consider *Madame Bovary* to be a feminist novel?
14. The novel takes a microscopic look at a segment of society that, in the early 1800's, was new: the middle class. What does Flaubert seem to be saying about merchants and professionals?
15. Flaubert shows us only glimpses of the upper class and the lower class. Why?
16. Why did Flaubert include the blind man's story? Why did he include Hippolyte's story?
17. Humais emerges victorious in the end. What point is Flaubert making with this?
18. Why does Emma commit suicide?
19. What role did fate play in her life?
20. Is Emma a sympathetic character? Is Charles a sympathetic character?
21. Flaubert has been often quoted as saying, "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*," but how well does Flaubert understand Emma?