

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Madame Bovary 1991

Claude Chabrol. 1930-2010

STORY

The story of *Madame Bovary* is well known—our modern morality tale—and the historical achievement of its author, along with that of contemporaries like Balzac and Stendahl, is to have faced directly into the challenges to the individual of life in the new world of 19th century Europe. Balzac looked long and hard at the struggles of the individual to find a place in the often heartless city of the new world. (Dickens ploughed the same ground, in *Great Expectations*.) Stendahl faced the challenges to the ego, of building the self into a power force as strong as the mighty new world forming around one. Flaubert, in *Madame Bovary*, tracks the mortal combat engaged between a romantic soul, consumed by dreams, and a social world she was too childish to navigate.

Madame. Madame, when first we see her, is still a young woman, living in her father's house, in a small village in mid 19th century Normandy. She is manifestly romantic, dreaming of a larger world, but heading for what looks like life as a spinster, in a small country village. At this point in her life, even a visit from her father's friend the local doctor, Charles Bovary, is more than enough to arouse her, and with surprising aggression she draws him into her life, and lets herself into his, becoming the young wife of this older, widowed, and constitutionally sad country doctor. (The precipitousness of this feminine behavior is underlined by the direct-action, vividly toned work of the camera, which moves the audience eye at a starchy pace across the village lanes and period *Fachwerkhauser* of what could be a Corot landscape.) Tired, provincial, and without much imagination, Charles meekly fits in with the dreams of his passionate wife.

Ball. The rift between M. and Mme. Bovary announces itself early, and is manifest at the annual ball held by a local count; a ball to which Charles and Emma are surprisingly invited, though they are far below the count in birth or wealth. At the ball Emma's eyes widen as she watches the elegant and practiced swish of gowns, against the sharp tailor-fashioned suits of their graceful partners. Everyone she sees seems painfully out of the class of her husband Charles, who sits in the corner on a narrow chair, sipping his wine and waiting patiently for her to complete her mazurka. The long dark tunnel is starting to open under Emma, though at this point she can hardly imagine it.

Leon. Leon is the closest Emma can get in Yonville to a sophisticated young man. Studying to be a law clerk, interested in music and the arts, Leon quite brashly forces herself upon her—walks in the park, etc.—until Emma gets worried that 'people would talk,' and that Charles would get news of the liaison—absolutely not something Emma would be up to dealing with. Soon enough Leon frets at Emma's neglect of him; he leaves town to study in Paris. For a while, at this point, Emma makes one of her periodic efforts to settle for what she has—which now includes a cute baby, in addition to Charles, toward whom she attempts to change her attitude.

Rodolphe. Meanwhile, a womanizing landowner in her own milieu, spots Emma and fancies the idea of an affair with her. Rodolph finally screws her, in the course of a horseback ride through the forests, and there commences a four year affair of which Charles Bovary seems to have no awareness. Ultimately Emma needs to bring matters to a head, and she demands that Rodolphe should depart with her to another city; when he agrees she goes to the local shopkeeper and, on credit, purchases a large consignment of clothes and luggage. No sooner has she committed this reckless transaction than she receives a note from Rodolphe—who is worried by the serious turn of events—telling her that he thinks it better they should separate. Emma's despair and pain could not be greater, and she considers suicide.

Tragedy. The remainder of the tale is our slow horror at the tragedy befalling Emma, and her helplessness to prevent the developments. (Charles, meanwhile, is wading through his own problems—for example, attempting with disastrous results to cure a clubfoot.) Finally, after Emma's failed efforts in love—first with a dull husband, then with two lovers, Rodolphe and Leon, who are far from being good friends to her—her downfall is guaranteed by her financial problems, of which of course she has left Charles completely unaware, borrowing on credit and delaying payments. This downfall theme reaches crisis stage, when Emma discovers that Leon is now living in the nearby city of Rouen; desperate Emma increases her indebtedness to her local shopkeeper, by borrowing furnishings and niceties for Leon, incurring an impossible debt burden, which is about to destroy her. Turned down by all her boyfriends, harassed by the shopkeeper and then the bailiffs of Yonville, Emma realizes that she is helpless, too humiliated to confess to Charles, and hopeless. She swallows arsenic, and leaves her husband in the dark, where in his ignorance all he can feel is loss and pain.

THEMES

Romanticism. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, in Britain and Western Europe, the sense of a lost world—of finer life styles, lords and ladies, and the agricultural gentleness that so marks the rolling landscapes of central Britain and France—makes its way into the imaginative construction of reality; dreamers like Mme. Bovary emerge from the corners of every village and moor, shaping tastes in art, dress, and decorum. Emma Bovary is part of that mind set we describe, Romanticism.

Impulsiveness. Fearing the real danger, that she will be left a spinster in the countryside, Emma reaches out to the first eligible husband she can set her eyes on. Charles Bovary needs to do little more than visit Emma's dad, when he finds himself spotted, courted, and caught up in Emma's impulsive need.

Selfishness. Emma is selfish. She makes little effort to see what is in the mind of her husband, the doctor, or to imagine that her lovers do not have her best interests in mind!

Naivete. Emma is so wrapped up in herself, that she can not see the dangers of buying fine clothes and furnishings from M. l'Heureux. She does not think ahead to the necessity of an eventual payback. It is part of her 'Romanticism' that she believes the world of her dreams will 'come true.'

CHARACTERS

Emma Bovary is the central figure. Like Effie Briest, in Fassbinder's film of the same name, Emma is brought up with stars in her eyes, falls for men who seem to her not only charming but loving, and in the end finds that *no one loves her except her husband Charles, whom foremost of the film she scorns as a loser and a puppy dog.*

Charles Bovary is a quiet country doctor, just widowed when we first meet him. He is not seriously in love with Emma, who courts him and then tires of him, and he would gladly continue living the quiet, unchallenging life of a small town general practitioner. He comes to love Emma, as well as to feel dependent on her view of him.

Rodolphe is a country squire ladies man, interested in Emma for the adventure. He is unwilling, when the chips are down at the end, to stick with her and support her.

M. Homais is the free thinking village pharmacist, who not only monologues at length about his godless world view, but carries out medical malpractices which in the end—after Charles and Emma have passed on--win him the medal of the *Legion d'honneur.*

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MADAME BOVARY

Character. Mme. Bovary is the main character, for it is her loves, hopes, childish dreams which contain the promise of hope for the novel as a whole. She is the only character in the novel who dreams dreams of beauty and love, and though she proves lethally naïve, in her strategies for fulfilling her dreams, she is at least a dreamer.

Parallels. Jane Eyre, Miss Havesham (Dickens, *Great Expectations*), Dorothea Brooke (Eliot's *Middlemarch*), Beatrice (in *Much Ado about Nothing*), or even back to Dido: we have no trouble finding women, in literature, for whom the mystique of Romance overwhelms all practical considerations; not a few of them, like Emma, have to learn in the hardest way, how to separate a good man from a fancy man.

Illustrative moments

Despondent. As a potential spinster in a small farm village, the Emma we first meet is despondent. She despairs of finding a way out into love and the world. This despondency accounts for the intensity of her initial aggression toward Charles.

Envious. When Charles takes Emma to the annual ball held by the local country squire, she is jealous of the fine ladies with their fans, minuets, and elegant squires.

Repulsed. When Emma asks M. L'heureux, the local shopkeeper, for patience with the payment of her debt, he offers a sexual quid pro quo. She turns him down, repulsed by his behavior and his looks.

Destroyed. As the net of debts closes in on her, Emma feels increasingly desperate. Ultimately her self-despair is intolerable, and she destroys herself with arsenic.

Discussion questions

What kind of Mme. Bovary does Chabrol create, through the acting of Isabelle Huppert? Can you imagine a very different, more robust and hearty, Mme. Bovary?

What do you think of the Rodolphe Chabrol creates? Is he what you would imagine? Is he sufficiently immoral? Has he some genuine feeling for Emma?

Does Chabrol experiment 'visually' in *Madame Bovary*? Any cross shots or jump shots? Does the narrative advance methodically?