

Madame Bovary by Gustav Flaubert

Essay by William Howard

December 2020 Athenaeum

The references for this essay are the following:

Madame Bovary, Gustav Flaubert , translated by Francis Steegmuller

Flaubert and Madame Bovary, a Double Portrait, also by Steegmuller

The Wikipedia pages related to Gustav Flaubert

I should also note that a great collection of Flaubert's letters have survived and these are a great source of information, though I'm only accessing them through secondary sources.

In the back of the antique shop stood the dresser. He immediately recognized a master's work. The exquisite carved feet, the graceful curve of the pediment. The drawers concave, then convex, then concave again. The fitting of the hand-cut dovetails belied the age of the piece he knew surpassed a hundred years. Not a nail, nor a peg was to be seen - though he knew where they were and how they had been obscured. The drawers settled perfectly flush to rail and stile. The precision he noticed, but his hand was quick at the flashlight. Piercing through the veil of the thin paint that had been added many years later, he caught the complexities and beauty of the burlwood buried shallow underneath. He smiled at the perfect composition. The master's eye had seen and captured symmetries hidden in the burl and he had laid them out dissected in match veneers. Quarter pieces for each drawer front - matched horizontally and vertically.

Gustave Flaubert penned Madame Bovary from September 1851 to April 1856 at the lightning speed of 5.15 days per page. Bouilhet (boo-yay), his friend and editor appeared on Sundays during the process.

"Flaubert read him what he had written during the week - sometimes only a page, or two, or three... Together they read over sentences dozens, even hundreds of times; and then when each sentence seemed right, they read over the paragraphs into which they were combined. Gradually, out of single sentences that were simple and direct, Flaubert learned how to construct paragraphs and pages that were also simple and solid, but shimmering and rich as well; inversions, shifts of emphasis, variety in sentence length resulted in a style that was more compelling and stronger than the monotony of the romantics" (F&MB, p241)

Like the master's dresser, Madame Bovary functions, and endures. The pieces precisely fitted and joined. Few wasted words, no unnecessary characters. Personalities and propensities are well developed, not by telling us these things - by showing us these things. Translated many times by a range of experts, and based on critiques of these translations, our modern English versions do retain much of the elegance of the original language. Yet, one imagines the beauty that must lie just below the veil of the English paint that obscures the intricacies of the burlwood.

The importance of language

Is the language that important really? We can consider a simple example in German, English and French to illustrate the difference. French and English allow clauses of location, time, possession to be arranged in any

order - which German does now. However, where French really excels is the fluidity of the language and the subtleness of sound. Imagine you were asking a lady to have a drink. (these are approximate spellings, etc.)

German: Mochten sie dieses Abend mit mir etwas trinken. Hard sounds, all endings pronounced.

English: Do you have the time to share a drink with me tonight. More fluid, softer sounds, flexible word order.

French: Est-ce vous avez le temp du bois quelque chose avec moi ses soir. Very fluid, soft sounds, words flow into each other.

We learn German so we can have fun and order beer and schnitzel in Munich. We learn French for the pleasure of hearing it, of reading the original versions of Proust and Flaubert.

Flaubert said a lot of things about Madame Bovary including "C'est Moi" - its me - referring to the main character. He also said he was striving to write a book about absolutely nothing - indicating that the book would be devoid of plot and theme and stand alone on its near poetic rhythms. If he said these in earnest, I disagree with the first, and think he failed at the second, in effect, by succeeding at something more grand. The book is more than just style. Even stripped of the French language, it reads as smoothly as any book I can remember and it is devoid of any contrivances or trickery to advance the plot. The closest he comes to this is the arrangement for piano lessons in Rouen - but this is well within the ingenuity of illicit affairs. It also is nearly devoid of any preachiness. Yes, the perfectly matched burlwood may be the crowning jewel, but the dovetails and the fitting of the drawers are solid as well. Flaubert took great pride in choosing just the "le mot juste" - the right word - and avoiding cliché and the repetition of sounds in a sentence. For example, "The boy wrote ten similar syllables". Flaubert considered this attention to sound and word choice critical to his art. (Wikipedia)

Since I have mentioned the famous "C'est Moi" quote, let's have a brief examination of Flaubert the person.

Flaubert

Flaubert was born in 1821 and was raised in Rouen, about 100km NW of Paris, in the Province of Normandy. His father was a respected surgeon and Flaubert grew up spying on human dissections through windows. (F&MB p 15). He began writing at age eight with his first novella, "November", finished at age 21. As an adolescent, Flaubert was devoted to Romanticism and the emphasis of deep feeling as the most authentic truth. One had to be a romantic because it was in one's nature, because one was driven to romanticism and he was critical of anyone whom he considered to be simply following the crowd. He reserved even harsher judgement for those he judged to be little interested in feelings, such as the middle class bourgeois - characterized as those focused on daily affairs, business, money and climbing the ladder. Love of art, poetry, the theater, the classics, deep feeling - these were placed on the pedestal while his inner circle lived by the phrase "Hatred of the bourgeois is the beginning of virtue." At age 20, he began to study law, but with little enthusiasm. At age 23 he had his first epileptic seizure and subsequent attacks allowed him to abandon the study of law and pursue literature. An important event occurred in May 1845 when he became entranced by Breughel's painting "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" in Genoa. The following year, 1846, he lost his father due to gangrene following a botched leg operation and his sister died giving birth to his niece Caroline. It was also the year he met Louise Colet, and award-winning poet, with whom he would have a constantly stormy eight-year affair.

A vignette from the night that Flaubert started the affair with Louise illustrates his devotion to emotion over reason. Over dinner, with her young daughter present but too young to understand, Flaubert directly asked Louise - married and at this point still an acquaintance - her view of adultery. The child next to them neither husband nor lover had claimed - a fact both adults knew. Louise was a bit shocked and Flaubert repeated the question. She gave an answer, condemning adultery in general, while adding nuance to her answer for special cases, like hers, where the woman is ill-treated. Flaubert interrupted her. From Steedmuller's summary based on his letters:

[Flaubert countered] "Adultery was glorious, it was a revolt against the most bourgeois and detestable of institutions. ...[it] was the feeling concerning adultery which was suddenly surging up in him again, he declared, staring at Madame Colet." (F&MB p 62-63).

Following a long carriage ride through town with Louise's daughter asleep at her feet and they in a long embrace, they consummated their affair that evening in her apartment.

He spent 1848 and 49 writing a book with fantastic themes and wide-ranging settings based on, and named after, his nearly spiritual encounter with Breughel's "The Temptation of Saint Anthony". After forcing two of his friends, Brouilet and Maxime Du Camp, to listen to his reading of it - without interruption for eight four-hour sessions, his friends rendered their verdict: "We think you should throw it into the fire, and never speak of it again." They encouraged him instead to focus on what he knew - Normandy and to write a story set there. He left France for two years, traveling with Du Camp to the Near East where he slept with courtesans - women and boys - contracting syphilis. Flaubert had changed significantly. Balding, having gained weight, he seemed to have lost his vigor and drive and following the temptation of Saint Anthony debacle, was unsure of the path forward. Brouilet recounted to him, in detail, a true story that had happened in Normandy, and suggested that this be the book Flaubert should write, which he did. As I hope to share later, this story is essentially Madame Bovary right down to many of the details. Flaubert did not invent the plot of Madame Bovary, it was handed to him almost complete.

The sensuality of Emma

I found that my feelings toward the titular character changed over time. First, she was the innocent youth, then the wife devoid of any romantic passion, then the spiritual being struggling to do what is right and live with her disappointments and within her means. Once, however, she tasted true sexual passion, there was no returning to the mediocre - though she tried one last time following the departure of her first lover. Eventually she surrenders to desire and she is changed. Now, it is her right to be satiated in all ways. Sexually, emotionally, intellectually, artistically, materially.

Her sensuality is hinted at early in the novel in these two passages, that will round out my essay. The first clear sensual clue is when Charles Bovary is looking for his riding crop and Emma assists him. Pay attention to the position and form of her body during these passages and her body in relation to Bovary's:

".. he began to rummage on the bed, behind doors, under chairs. It had fallen on the floor between the grain bags and the wall. Mademoiselle Emma caught sight of it and reached for it, bending down across the sacks. Charles hurried over politely , and, as he, too, stretched out his arm he felt his body in slight contact with the girl's back, bent there beneath him. She stood up, blushing crimson, and glanced at him over her shoulder as she handed him his crop".

Then, on his next visit to the farm...

“She brought a bottle of curacao from the cupboard, reached to a high shelf for two liqueur glasses, filled one to the brim and poured a few drops in the other. She touched her glass to his and raised it to her mouth. Because it was almost empty she had to bend backwards to be able to drink; and with her head tilted back, her neck and her lips outstretched, she began to laugh at tasking nothing; and then the tip of her tongue came out from between her small teeth and began daintily to lick the bottom of the glass.”

To this we must add, of course, later in our discussion, the Rouen carriage ride with Leon.

In respect of your patience, I shall stop here having given us enough to start. I leave you with the image of the fine piece of furniture. Having withstood the passing of time, let us pull at the drawers, look behind and underneath, and see if it has retained its beauty - even when painted.