

Madame Bovary

by Gustave Flaubert · Language: EN

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Overview

Madame Bovary, published in 1856, is Gustave Flaubert's masterpiece of literary realism. The novel follows Emma Rouault, a young woman raised in a convent who marries a modest country doctor, Charles Bovary. Dissatisfied with her provincial life and mundane marriage, Emma yearns for the passion and luxury she has read about in romantic novels. She embarks on two adulterous affairs, first with the wealthy landowner Rodolphe Boulanger and then with the law clerk Léon Dupuis, and accumulates ruinous debt through extravagant purchases. Flaubert's meticulous prose and unflinching portrayal of Emma's self-destruction create a profound critique of romantic idealism, bourgeois mediocrity, and the limited roles available to women in 19th-century France.

The novel's story arc traces Emma's escalating disillusionment and desperation. Her attempts to escape her reality through affairs and material consumption only deepen her unhappiness. As her debts mount and her lovers abandon her, she sees no way out and poisons herself with arsenic, dying a slow and agonizing death. Charles, devastated by her death and the discovery of her infidelities, dies soon after, leaving their daughter Berthe to a life of poverty. The novel's final image of the pharmacist Homais, a symbol of self-satisfied bourgeois success, underscores Flaubert's satirical view of the society that destroyed Emma.

Madame Bovary matters not only as a landmark of realist fiction but also as a legal and cultural milestone. Flaubert was tried for obscenity for the novel's depiction of adultery, though he was acquitted. The book's innovative use of free indirect discourse, its precise observation of detail, and its unflinching psychological depth influenced countless writers. It remains a timeless exploration of the gap between romantic fantasy and reality, and the consequences of trying to live a life that is not one's own.

Key Takeaways

- Emma Bovary's tragedy stems from her inability to reconcile her romantic fantasies with the realities of provincial life, showing the dangers of unchecked idealism.
- Flaubert's use of free indirect discourse blurs the line between narrator and character, creating a deeply immersive and psychologically complex portrait of Emma.
- The novel critiques bourgeois values, particularly the pursuit of status and material comfort, which Flaubert saw as hollow and corrupting.

- Emma's financial ruin is as much a cause of her downfall as her adultery, highlighting the precarious position of women who had no legal or economic independence.
- The book's realistic detail, from the medical procedures to the agricultural fair, grounds its emotional drama in a vividly observed social world.
- Flaubert's trial for obscenity and his acquittal established a precedent for the freedom of literary expression in France.
- The novel's ending, with Homais thriving and the Bovary family destroyed, suggests that mediocrity and self-interest often triumph over genuine feeling.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1, Chapters 1-3

The novel opens with Charles Bovary's childhood and his unremarkable medical career. He is introduced as a clumsy, mediocre student who eventually becomes a health officer. Charles marries a wealthy older widow, Héloïse, but after her death, he meets Emma Rouault, the daughter of a farmer. Charles is immediately smitten by her beauty and refinement. They marry, and Emma, who has romantic notions from her convent education, is quickly disappointed by the reality of marriage and provincial life.

Part 1, Chapters 4-6

The wedding and early married life are described. Emma finds Charles dull and his conversation 'flat as a pavement.' She tries to cultivate a romantic ideal, but her attempts to feel passion fail. Flaubert details her convent upbringing, where she read romantic novels and dreamed of love and adventure. Emma becomes increasingly bored and restless, and when Charles moves his practice to the village of Yonville-l'Abbaye, she hopes for a change, but the move only intensifies her dissatisfaction.

Part 1, Chapters 7-9

Emma's discontent grows. She attends a ball at the château of the Marquis d'Andervilliers, where she experiences the glamour and sophistication she craves. The memory of the ball haunts her, making her daily life seem even more unbearable. She becomes ill with boredom and anxiety. Charles decides to move to Yonville to improve her health, but the move is a turning point: Emma is pregnant, but she feels no joy. The chapter ends with the family arriving in Yonville, where they meet the eccentric pharmacist Homais and the law clerk Léon.

Part 2, Chapters 1-3

In Yonville, Emma meets Léon Dupuis, a young clerk who shares her taste for romantic literature and music. They are drawn to each other but are too timid to act on their feelings. Emma gives birth to a daughter, Berthe, but she is disappointed that the child is not a boy. Léon, frustrated by his unrequited feelings, leaves for Paris. Emma is again plunged into melancholy, but she soon

catches the attention of Rodolphe Boulanger, a wealthy, cynical landowner who sees her as an easy conquest.

Part 2, Chapters 4-6

Rodolphe seduces Emma with practiced charm. She falls deeply in love, believing she has finally found the passion she dreamed of. They begin a secret affair, meeting in the garden of her house. Emma becomes reckless, and her behavior raises suspicions. Charles, however, remains oblivious. Emma's affair gives her a sense of power and excitement, but she also becomes more demanding and possessive. Rodolphe, who is not truly in love, begins to tire of her intensity.

Part 2, Chapters 7-9

Emma's affair with Rodolphe intensifies. She becomes increasingly extravagant, buying gifts for him and herself, and she begins to neglect her household duties. She tries to persuade Rodolphe to run away with her, but he is reluctant. The famous agricultural fair scene occurs, where the speeches of the officials are intercut with Rodolphe's declarations of love, satirizing bourgeois hypocrisy. Emma's debts to the merchant Lheureux begin to mount, as she buys luxury items on credit.

Part 2, Chapters 10-12

Emma's passion for Rodolphe grows, and she becomes more demanding. She suggests they elope, and Rodolphe agrees, but on the eve of their departure, he writes her a letter of abandonment. Emma is devastated and falls seriously ill with a brain fever. Charles nurses her back to health, but she remains emotionally numb. To distract her, Charles takes her to the opera in Rouen, where they meet Léon, who has become more sophisticated.

Part 3, Chapters 1-3

Emma and Léon renew their acquaintance. Léon, now a law clerk in Rouen, is more confident, and Emma is attracted to him. They begin an affair, with Emma traveling to Rouen on the pretext of taking piano lessons. The affair is passionate at first, but Emma soon becomes possessive and demanding. She lies to Charles to cover her tracks, and her debts to Lheureux continue to grow. Léon, like Rodolphe, begins to feel trapped by her intensity.

Part 3, Chapters 4-6

Emma's life becomes a web of lies and debts. Lheureux begins to call in his loans, and Emma is forced to sell property and borrow money at exorbitant rates. She tries to get money from Léon, but he is unable to help. She even attempts to seduce a notary, but he rejects her. Her desperation grows as she faces public humiliation. She becomes ill and anxious, and her relationship with Léon deteriorates.

Part 3, Chapters 7-9

Emma's debts reach a crisis point. Lheureux threatens to seize her property, and she cannot find anyone to lend her money. She goes to Rodolphe, hoping to revive their affair and get money, but he refuses. In despair, she swallows arsenic. She dies a slow, agonizing death, with Charles and Homais at her bedside. Charles is devastated, and he discovers her love letters after her death, which breaks his heart. He dies soon after, and Berthe is sent to live with relatives, eventually ending up in a cotton mill.

Part 3, Chapters 10-11

The novel's final chapters focus on the aftermath of Emma's death. Charles, though devastated, tries to honor her memory, but he is haunted by her infidelity. He dies in his garden, and his death is discovered by Homais. Berthe is left an orphan, and the novel ends with Homais, the pharmacist, thriving and receiving the Legion of Honor, a symbol of the self-satisfied bourgeois society that Emma despised. The final image is of Homais's success, suggesting that mediocrity and hypocrisy triumph.

Themes

- Romantic idealism vs. reality
- Bourgeois mediocrity
- Gender and women's roles
- The dangers of debt and materialism
- Illusion and self-deception
- The banality of provincial life

Notable Quotes

- "She wanted to die, but she also wanted to live in Paris." — Emma's contradictory desires after her first affair with Rodolphe, reflecting her restless longing for escape.
- "Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars." — Flaubert's narrator reflects on the inadequacy of language to express deep emotion, a theme throughout the novel.
- "I am a woman of the world, and I know what I am doing." — Emma's self-justification to Léon as she begins her second affair, showing her delusion of sophistication.
- "The most important thing is to be happy." — Charles's simple, unreflective philosophy, which contrasts with Emma's restless pursuit of passion.
- "She was as much in love with the idea of love as with the man." — Narrator's observation about Emma's romantic idealism, which leads her to confuse fantasy with reality.
- "He had never been so happy as in this moment, when he was about to die." — Charles's final moments, after he learns of Emma's infidelity, suggesting that his love for her was the

only meaning in his life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Madame Bovary about?

Madame Bovary is about Emma Bovary, a woman in 19th-century France who is dissatisfied with her marriage to a provincial doctor. She seeks escape through romantic affairs and extravagant spending, but her actions lead to debt, betrayal, and ultimately her suicide. The novel is a critique of romantic idealism and bourgeois society.

Is Madame Bovary worth reading?

Yes. It is a cornerstone of literary realism and a profound psychological study. Flaubert's prose is precise and beautiful, and the story of Emma's self-destruction is both tragic and compelling. It offers deep insights into human nature, societal pressures, and the dangers of living in fantasy. It's a must-read for lovers of classic literature.

How does Madame Bovary end?

Spoiler: Emma, overwhelmed by debt and abandoned by her lovers, swallows arsenic and dies a painful death. Charles, devastated, later discovers her love letters and dies of grief. Their daughter Berthe is left to relatives and ends up working in a cotton mill. The novel ends with the pharmacist Homais receiving the Legion of Honor, symbolizing the triumph of mediocrity.

Who should read Madame Bovary?

Readers who enjoy classic literary fiction, psychological character studies, and social critique will appreciate this novel. It's also ideal for those interested in 19th-century French literature, realism, and feminist themes. Students of literature and anyone who appreciates beautifully crafted prose will find it rewarding.

How long does it take to read Madame Bovary?

The average reader can finish Madame Bovary in about 8 to 10 hours. The book has roughly 200,000 words, so at a typical reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes around 800 minutes. Most people read it in a week or two if they read a few chapters daily.