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Madame Bovary: By Gustave Flaubert (Illustrated And Unabridged)



Synopsis

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.

• : Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary

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About 'Madame Bovary' by Gustave Flaubert

Madame Bovary (1856) is the French writer Gustave Flaubert's debut novel. The story focuses on a doctor's wife, Emma Bovary, who has adulterous affairs and lives beyond her means in order to escape the banalities and emptiness of provincial life. Though the basic plot is rather simple, even archetypal, the novel's true art lies in its details and hidden patterns. Flaubert was a notorious perfectionist and claimed always to be searching for le mot juste ("the precise word").

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Customer Reviews

In this masterpiece of French literature, Gustave Flaubert tells the tale of Emma Bovary, née Roualt, an incurably romantic woman who finds herself trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage in a

prosaic bourgeois French village, Yonville-l'Abbaye. Her attempts to escape the tedium of her life through a series of adulterous affairs are thwarted by the reality that the men she chooses to love are shallow and self-centered and thus are unable to love anyone but themselves. In love with a love that can never be and dreadfully overstretched financially, Emma finds herself caught in a downward spiral that can only end in tragedy. Part of the difficulty, and the pleasure, of reading *Madame Bovary* comes from the fact that Flaubert refuses to embed his narrative with a moral matrix; he refuses, at least explicitly, to tell the reader, what, if any, moral lesson he should draw from the text. It is this lack of moral viewpoint that made *Madame Bovary* shocking to Flaubert's contemporaries, so much so that Flaubert found himself taken to court for the novel's offenses to public and religious decency. Although today's readers will find no such apparent scandals in the book, they will still be challenged to make sense of both Emma and her story. It is quite common to see Emma Bovary as silly, extravagant and much too romantically inclined. An avid consumer of romantic literature (a habit into which the heroine was indoctrinated in her convent school upbringing), Emma has made the morbid mistake of buying into the notion of romantic love in its fullest sense, and the mortal mistake of believing she can reach its fulfillment in her own life. As such, Emma Bovary becomes a tragic figure of almost mythic proportion.

I first read *Madame Bovary* in Geoffrey Wall's translation for Penguin and throughout the book I felt as if something was off, this can't be the same novel acclaimed by many as the pinnacle of the written word as art. Then I picked up Francis Steegmuller's version and right from start the difference was palpable. Consider the following excerpt from when Emma's father tells Charles about the death of his own wife: WALL: "I dropped down under a tree, I wept, I called to the good Lord, I ranted at him... I just wanted to be like those moles... jiggered, you know... I thought as how other folks, just that second, had their nice warm little wives in their arms... I was out of my mind very near, stopped eating, I did." STEEGMULLER: "I lay down under a tree and cried. I talked to God, told him all kinds of crazy things... I wished I were dead, like the maggoty moles... I thought of how other men were holding their wives in their arms at that very moment... I was almost out of my mind. I couldn't eat." Wall published his version in 1992, so he should have known that many readers are bound to pick up that Yodaesque tone at the end which also pops up in many other places, it does. From what little I can glean from the French text, his translation actually appears structurally more faithful than Steegmuller's, at least judging by the number and spacing of punctuations. And yet somehow it comes out as the more stilted of the two. Wall should have heeded Flaubert's eerily prescient advice to his future translators, given right around the third page: (in Steegmuller's

version) "For while he had a fair knowledge of grammatical rules, his translations lacked elegance.

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