

- order to understand why Madame Bovary is hailed as an anti-romantic, realist piece of literature, and to what extent such a classification is true, it is first important to understand what realism in literature means. Literary realism is the attempt of literature to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality or elaborate artistic conventions and implausible or supernatural elements. According to the twentieth-century scholar Rene Wellek, the aim of realist literature is “the objective representation of social reality.”^[1] The realist novel is concerned with contemporary life and everyday, commonplace scenes. It focuses on characters in a social setting and delves deep into their psyche. In terms of stylistic technique, the realist novel’s approach to its subject matter is straightforward and detached, almost analytic in its description of characters and events.

When Flaubert wrote Madame Bovary in 1856, the age of Romanticism was winding down and the notion of realism in contrast to the idealism of Romanticism was gaining traction. Flaubert’s French contemporaries Stendhal and Balzac had already written novels that were considered realist, and Flaubert was persuaded by his friends to tackle a realistic, down-to-earth subject in a novel too. And while Madame Bovary, which was the resultant novel, was immediately heralded as a realist work – Emile Zola said that it “dealt romanticism its first blow”^[2] – Flaubert was powerfully influenced by the Romantic Movement and did not take kindly to the novel being considered realist. His romantic leanings are evident in the fact that he openly stated that he personally identifies with Madame Bovary, a character who was decidedly romantic. “*Madame Bovary c’est moi*,” Flaubert declared – Madame Bovary is me^[3].

Nevertheless, Madame Bovary has quite a few elements – both in terms of style and content – that make it a realist or anti-romantic novel. One of the biggest characteristics of realist fiction is that it has verisimilitude – it has the appearance of being real. Flaubert achieved this verisimilitude to such a degree that readers and critics tried to find out which real person Madame Bovary was modeled after. There were a several theories as to who the character was based on. Flaubert employed several stylistic techniques to achieve this degree of realism in Madame Bovary. One of such techniques is the realistic details he gives in the description of places or people – details which are not romantic at all. For instance, in the beginning of the novel, when Charles returns to the Rouault farm, with the excuse to check on Emma’s father, the scene is presented in great detail, from the buzzing of the flies that had “drowned themselves in the dregs of the cider” to the “small drops of perspiration on [Emma’s] bare shoulders.”^[4] The dirty glasses on the

table, the soot in the fireplace – such are details a romantic would choose to ignore but which Flaubert describes at length.

According to critic Jonathan Culler, Flaubert also incorporates lengthy descriptions of things which seemingly have no contribution to plot, character or theme but which are simply there to give a sense that the world of the novel exists independently of the characters and is indifferent to what the characters might be going through[5]. For example, at the beginning of Part Two, there is a long description of Yonville-l'Abbaye, the town at which the Bovarys are shortly arriving. The description includes its geography, the buildings situated in the town, and even the graveyard and its resident gravedigger. It is these details and descriptions, Culler argues, that gives the novel the 'Effect of Reality' which Roland Barthes talked about[6].

Flaubert also sustains this realism by using symbolism only rarely in his prose, and even when he does use metaphors, they are taken from everyday, ordinary life instead of being sweeping and abstract. For example, Charles's mother, when she feels slighted and left out by Charles's new marriage to Emma, is described to be "like a ruined man gazing through the windows at people dining in his old home." [7] Such metaphors, grounded as they are in reality, and combined with the specific details which give texture to the world of the novel, make the events in the novel realistic and plausible.

Madame Bovary employs a style of writing known as free indirect discourse or *style indirect libre*. This is a style of third-person narration which incorporates the essence of first-person direct speech. For example, when Emma becomes involved with Rodolphe, the novel goes, "So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon marvels where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium." [8] These lines are instances of free indirect style, as they are the thoughts of Emma intermingled into the narration. Because free indirect style allows the reader to get inside the mind of the characters and look at things from a subjective point of view, it goes against the omniscient, detached narrator which other realists preferred. But Flaubert employs this technique in such a way that the prose has a detached, impersonal style. The way Flaubert uses it erases the narrator and his judgment from the story. It presents things as they are, without the narrator or the authorial voice giving his own subjective opinion on them. He infuses realism with emotional subjectivity but still creates a world which is real and objective.

Madame Bovary is also a work of realism in terms of characterization. Emma Bovary herself is a representation of the historical situation for women at the time. At the time when the novel is set, various feminist developments had

occurred in France but essentially nothing had changed, especially for provincial women like Emma. Emma's circumstances, and the dissatisfaction she feels with such a constrained life, is one realistically representative of many women at the time. Moreover, Emma's ennui and restlessness is something even modern readers can relate to. Even though Emma is depicted as a character with romantic notions, her portrayal itself is never romanticized or idealized. In fact, Flaubert shows through her portrayal, the dangerous consequences of having such romantic notions in the first place. He often treats Emma's romanticism with irony, depicting how believing in romantic narrations can be self-destructive. For example, Emma is shown to be overly influenced by the romance novels she reads, as a consequence of which she is continuously inventing similar narratives for herself, casting herself as the heroine of romantic adventures. Her perception of reality is so riddled with romantic ideas that she refuses to adapt to reality as it really is. So it can be said that Flaubert puts romanticism under a realist's lens and critiques it from that point of view.

Madame Bovary delves into the intricacies of bourgeois life, a subject matter that is often found in the literature of realism. Emma's disappointments stem in great part from her dissatisfaction with the world of the French bourgeoisie. She aspires to be part of the aristocracy. This theme reflects a rising social trend of the latter part of the 19th century and Flaubert uses Emma's disgust of the middle class life to express his own frustration of this class in the contemporary France of his time. Emma is described as an individual who is part of a larger society, and the influences of culture and class are present everywhere in the novel. Flaubert describes vividly small-town life, with its idle gossiping and petty activities, as a backdrop to the lives of the Bovarys. It is an accurate portrayal of the local milieu and its values. The novel charts the way middle class life, with its moral conservatism, rough manners, and unsophisticated taste, makes people imprisoned and suffocated within its confines.

Despite Flaubert's insistence otherwise, Madam Bovary is an enduring work of realism that uses sophisticated narrative techniques and complex characterization to accurately depict a nuanced portrayal of provincial bourgeois life in 19th century Europe, and so Emily Montegut was justified in declaring the novel to have killed romanticism.