

CHARACTERS EMMA BOVARY

In *Emma Bovary*, Flaubert uses irony to criticize romanticism and to investigate the relation of beauty to corruption and of fate to free will. Emma embarks directly down a path to moral and financial ruin over the course of the novel. She is very beautiful, as we can tell by the way several men fall in love with her, but she is morally corrupt and unable to accept and appreciate the realities of her life. Since her girlhood in a convent, she has read romantic novels that feed her discontent with her ordinary life. She dreams of the purest, most impossible forms of love and wealth, ignoring whatever beauty is present in the world around her. Flaubert once said, "Madame Bovary is me," and many scholars believe that he was referring to a weakness he shared with his character for romance, sentimental flights of fancy, and melancholy. Flaubert, however, approaches romanticism with self-conscious irony, pointing out its flaws even as he is tempted by it. Emma, on the other hand, never recognizes that her desires are unreasonable. She rails emotionally against the society that, from her perspective, makes them impossible for her to achieve.

Emma's failure is not completely her own. Her character demonstrates the many ways in which circumstance—rather than free will—determined the position of women in the nineteenth century. If Emma were as rich as her lover, Rodolphe, for instance, she would be free to indulge the lifestyle she imagines. Flaubert suggests at times that her dissatisfaction with the bourgeois society she lives in is justified. For example, the author includes details that seem to ridicule Homais's pompous speechmaking or Charles's boorish table manners. These details indicate that Emma's plight is emblematic of the difficulties of any sensitive person trapped among the French bourgeoisie. But Emma's inability to accept her situation and her attempt to escape it through adultery and deception constitute moral errors. These mistakes bring about her ruin and, in the process, cause harm to innocent people around her. For example, though dim-witted and unable to recognize his wife's true character, Charles loves Emma, and she deceives him. Similarly, little Berthe is but an innocent child in need of her mother's care and love, but Emma is cold to her, and Berthe ends up working

in a cotton mill because of Emma's selfish spending and suicide, and because of Charles's resulting death.

We can see that Emma's role as a woman may have an even greater effect on the course of her life than her social status does. Emma is frequently portrayed as the object of a man's gaze: her husband's, Rodolphe's, Leon's, Justin's—even Flaubert's, since the whole novel is essentially a description of how he sees Emma. Moreover, Emma's only power over the men in her life is sexual. Near the end of her life, when she searches desperately for money, she has to ask men for it, and the only thing she can use to persuade them to give it to her is sex. Emma's prostitution is the result of her self-destructive spending, but the fact that, as a woman, she has no other means of finding money is a result of the misogynistic society in which she lives.