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Flaubert's Feminine Side: The Role of Women in *Madame Bovary*

Women in Flaubert's time generally enjoyed fewer societal privileges and a lower social status than women in modern society. When Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary* in 1856, for instance, American females could not yet vote; their roles were confined to living in the shadows of the men that surrounded them, restricted to wifedom and motherhood. However, in light of reality television shows like "Joe Millionaire," the portrayal of women in modern media differs only slightly from the depiction of women in Flaubert's novel. In *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert focuses on the roles of women in nineteenth-century France; in particular, the realist author comments on the psychosocial realities of French provincial bourgeois society. Flaubert sympathizes with his title character by highlighting how the female protagonist's excesses are psychologically produced by the narrow focus of her town, as well as by the limitations of possible female identities and roles of someone of her stature. Moreover, through the novel Flaubert notes that the unconscious play-acting in her life is common to the entire world in which she dwells, and is not something that is exclusive to Bovary's psyche. Although Flaubert does not fully emotionally empathize with his heroine, he does not condemn Emma Bovary for her adultery either. A literary critic contemporary with Flaubert noted that the author "condemns vice as little as he praises virtue," (Morras 226). Rather than offering moral judgment on the character of his heroine, Flaubert suggests that Emma's preoccupation with

social status and material goods and her adulterous behavior are inevitable products of being a woman in a small, narrow-minded French provincial town.

During Emma and Charles's wedding, the physical features of the guests and the blatant stress on monetary, rather than spiritual or emotional aspects of marital union, become the focus of the ceremony. The focus of the scene is clearly materialistic, from the vehicles in which the guests arrive to the description of their clothing. "The ladies wore country-style headdresses and city-style gowns, with gold watch chains, tippets (the ends crossed and tucked into their belts), or small colored fichus attached to the back with pins leaving the neck bare" (865). Furthermore, the description of the food being served -- "four roasts of beef, six fricassees of chicken, a veal casserole, three legs of mutton, and in the center a charming little suckling pig flanked by four andouilles à l'oseille—pork sausages flavored with sorrel" --is a picture of pure gluttony. In fact, the overall impact of the scene would fit perfectly on the pages of a modern Bridal magazine. The scene underscores a message that love is not an emotionally satisfying ideal but is instead an object on display, a message that Emma has internalized and picked up from the social world in which she lives.

Through the wedding scene, Flaubert shows that the trappings of materialism shape Emma's world and that image and wealth establishes how people are judged and valued in the town. Even during Emma's childhood in a convent, she is confronted with images of material beauty emphasizing the sensuous aspects of spirituality rather than the core of spirituality itself. "As she continued to live uninterruptedly in the insipid atmosphere of the classrooms, among the white-faced women with their brass crucifixes dangling from their rosaries, she gently succumbed to the mystical languor induced by the perfumes of the altar, the coolness of the holy-water fonts, the gleaming of candles. Instead of following the Mass, she kept her prayer

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