

Madame Bovary

Richard Pace

Course: ENGL 292H

Instructor: Dr. Jim Walter

Essay Type: Short Essay

The abyss that so terrifies Emma in *Madame Bovary* is reality and the crushing finality of it. The fantasy world that she has constructed from early childhood takes on more and more substance until it becomes her alternate reality. True reality is still there for her, but it exists as a shadow of the substance of her fantasies. When she is confronted by reality, in any form that threatens her fantasy world, she perceives it as an abyss opening before her.

Throughout the book, we see Emma creating her fantasy world and insulating herself from the harsh light of reality. The disillusionment with her marriage and the exposure to the glamour of Vaubyessard is a major building block in this fantasy world. Flaubert tells us that "her journey to Vaubyessard had made a gap in her life," and although "she was resigned" to her marriage and life with Charles, "something had rubbed off on [her heart] that could not be removed" (p. 40). We are told that from this point on that the memory of the ball at Vaubyessard "became an occupation" for her. Flaubert's genius is evident in his choice of words here. To use the term "obsession" would destroy the lambent subtlety at an early stage of the story, whereas "occupation" leaves us with an impression of the innocent triflings of a young woman.

Emma's alternate reality is, however, beyond obsession. A student of psychology would easily label her a true sociopath. She is incapable of feeling any genuine affection or love for anyone but herself. Even her daughter fails to evoke any true emotion in her. It would not make sense to consider that the abyss is guilt, because Emma is incapable of feeling guilt. Remorse, for Emma, is as selfish as the rest of her emotional desert, and is brought on by fear--not love. A

close examination of her religious indulgences reveals no guilt or chagrin. Rather, we are told that "she addressed to the Lord the same suave words that she had murmured formerly to her lover in the outpourings of adultery" (p.155).

The first time that the abyss is mentioned may be confusing for some, but only if it is taken out of context. In this instance--at the theatre with Charles--she rues the fact that "she had walked joyously and unwittingly into the abyss..." (p. 162). At first glance, it might seem that the abyss is her adultery, but marriage and adultery share the abyss here. It is also interesting to note that with marriage comes "degradation", while adultery brings only "disillusions". If the abyss had been mentioned before she was dumped by Rodolphe, only marriage would have been associated with it.

The voice of the abyss of reality is, of course, the wretch on the hillside. His words are profound, and sum up the essence of *Madame Bovary*:

Often the warmth of a summer day

Makes a young girl dream her heart away. (*Madame Bovary*, p.193)

His voice, "like a whirlwind in an abyss", strikes a chord of terror in Emma, though she does not know why. Emma has literally dreamed her heart (i.e. soul) away. She has no heart, and is devoid of anything of substance. Flaubert's indictment is subtle, but precise:

She had lost them one by one, at every stage in the growth of her soul, In the succession of her conditions; maidenhood, marriage and love-shedding them along her path like a traveler who leaves something of his wealth at every inn along the road. (*Madame Bovary*, p.124)

Emma's affair with Leon begins the rapid descent of her alternate reality toward the inevitable abyss of reality itself. The self-deception has now burst forth to where "her existence

was one long tissue of lies" (p.196). Adultery was no longer sufficient to sustain her fantasies, and she began to lie to her lover as well as to her self and her husband. She is no longer to be easily mistaken for a tragic heroine, but is now "irritable, greedy, voluptuous" (p.200). Her lover is not enough now to fuel her fantasy world, and she first tries to change him, then begins to detest him. She has, in her increasing desperation broken what Flaubert lays down as an alternate reality golden rule: "One must not touch one's idols, a little of the guilt always comes off on one's fingers" (p.205).

When the financial disaster is finally confirmed, it is mere icing on the cake. Emma is already destroyed from within. Flaubert masterfully brings her ruin to a crescendo with fiery, exploding spheres that are the dying gasp of her dreamscape. When they disappear, the lights of the houses through the fog are a picture of reality coming into focus, and then the abyss is there for her.

In a last ditch effort to cheat the abyss, Emma poisons herself. She somehow believes that she has accomplished this evasion as she lays dying, until the emissary of reality sings her dirge for her. At the very point of escape she is seized by the terror of reality, and pulled into the abyss by the song of the blind man.

Richard Pace is a Social Work major. Dr. James Walter was his English professor.

Dr. Walter's Comments: *Richard's paper displays the radiance of writing kindled by discriminating reading. His careful attention to words and their subtle tones in context translate into interpretive language that clarifies the subtle shapes of meaning.*