Madame Bovary: Feminine Or Masculine Behaviour

In this paper, I would like to analyse the ideas of what women should be like and what men should be like. Basically, it is the old question: what constitutes of feminine behaviour and what constitutes of masculine behaviour? What is acceptable for a man to do and what is acceptable for a female to do? And of course, what’s not acceptable? It is all about the roles.

In this essay, it is not going to be my own opinion about what’s wrong and what’s right or wrong for a specific gender, role, sexuality, race etc. I will use again ‘Madame Bovary’ by Gustave Flaubert to explore/discover the ideas of being a woman like Madame Bovary through marital status, gender, sexuality etc.

Emma Bovary, an ordinary woman, a mediocre woman, is actually a complex character, insofar as its author, Gustave Flaubert, has dug the character in order to give it both a complexity and a universality: Emma is less simple than she doesn't look like it.

Women? She is, without a doubt, biologically: married to a man she hates, mother in spite of herself, Emma cannot escape her bourgeois and feminine condition. However, as soon as the novel was published, voices were raised to note Emma's amazing virility: it is that Emma is not limited to the female gender, and sometimes dares to appear, behave, like a man. Could we not perceive, in this revolt of the genre, the first idea of feminism?

Type of the bourgeois of the nineteenth century, type of femininity, Emma also suffers from being a woman. In this, it questions the genre which is attributed to her.

In writing Madame Bovary, Flaubert wanted to create a female type, which would touch the general: he wanted to create a woman in whom all women could recognize themselves, to draw a portrait of the woman, more than a woman.

To do this, he did some investigative work, particularly concerning the fashion of the time and the different types of fabrics that could be bought in the Norman countryside (because Emma would be a great buyer), or the types of reading favoured by women readers (in the convent, Emma was fond of keepsakes, those little novels for women).

However, Emma is not an ordinary woman. She is indeed a woman who suffers from her feminine condition, and who is aware of the injustice of the difference in treatment between men and women.

Indeed, Emma Bovary is well aware of the limits of femininity. Thus, in the 19th century, a woman could only leave the family home by getting married; and that is why Emma decided to marry Charles: it is therefore her feminine condition that forces her to marry, whereas she does not love this man.

Moreover, once married, she knows that she cannot leave her husband and leave as she would like, which was not accepted at the time. That is why she evokes Rodolphe's freedom with envy, during a conversation in the comedy scene: she knows very well that Rodolphe's freedom is

due to her male sex, so it is very hard that Rodolphe does not even recognise it.

This female misfortune is perceived as inevitable: from birth, women are marked by the seal of dependence. So Emma, pregnant, on the verge of fulfilling her mother's duty (the ultimate female characteristic according to the codes of the time), dreams of a boy, so that the being she had created would at least escape the misfortune of femininity: the narrator evokes precisely the 'revenge in hope of all her past powerlessness' that the birth of a son would constitute.

However, like all great tragic heroes, Emma Bovary does not resign herself to fate, which in her case condemns her to be a woman. Indeed, she seeks to emancipate herself, and to get out of the shackles imposed on her, by adopting certain male attitudes and behaviours.

Emma Bovary's character, which is easily remembered as that of a fragile, melancholic and dreamy woman, also has more complex accents: those of a masculine, almost virile tonality. This masculinity then goes in the direction of a revolt against what the feminine implied at the time for women, submission to men, and deprivation of freedom.