Societal Influences In Madame Bovary

At a time where the French society repressed female thought and relegated women's roles to household chores, Gustave Flaubert crafted his fortuitous masterpiece. Although he scorned the likes of realism, Flaubert crafted his work based on the popular desire for a bourgeoisie lifestyle and the heightening discontent among the working class in 18th century France. Of course, his strained personal relationships, especially with his female relatives, influenced his work as well and provided inspiration for Emma Bovary, the central character of Madame Bovary. The rifts between 19th century French social classes are exemplified through Emma Bovary's psychological dissonance; social immobility and the repression of romantic ideals lead to Emma's downfall and highlight Flaubert's inner turmoil.

Gustave Flaubert's pride as an writer and natural inclination to lyricism stemmed from his youth. He was fascinated with stories of frustrated women with high aspirations or those who dealt with inner turmoil. It is possible that Madame Bovary was based on his fellow writer Ducamp's fictional provincial story told over one dinner party, or it may be an autobiography of Louise Pradier, an acquaintance of Flaubert who reflected the mannerisms of Emma Bovary (Gale). Furthermore, 17th century France greatly influenced Flaubert as well; many literary critics of the time dissuaded writing in the romanticism genre. In retaliation to these critics, who believed that his writing was overtly "lyrical", Flaubert wrote Madame Bovary. However, though many contemporary literary reviews deem it so, Flaubert never accepted Madame Bovary as a work of realism (Taylor). Despite critics immediately recognizing the work as significant, the French government censored its publication, citing "blasphemy and offending public morals". Ultimately, Flaubert and Madame Bovary attained a certain notoriety in France and Flaubert grew to resent his work. During this period, the French political and social climate also influenced Flaubert's writing. The class struggle and French Revolution of 1848 overthrew the "Bourgeois Monarch" Louis Philippe around this period and Karl Marx emerged as a leader in analyzing the growing discontent. The revolution was directed by the petty bourgeoisie, or small business owners, who outnumbered the working class, and common complaints were for food shortages, bad harvest, and a lack of representation in the government (Marx). This discontent parallels with Emma's own, where she struggles to find meaning in being "poor". Her dreams of paradise drowned in sentimentalism and opulence hinder her ability to live life with practicality. The endless want and desire from her unfulfilled ambitions prove to be a linchpin for her downfall. However, though Emma's unwise judgement plays a large part in her demise, societal influences provide a basis for her unhappiness.

Emma's daily oppression due to her status as a woman is highlighted by Flaubert's choice of perspective and his use of free indirect speech, bland descriptions of the countryside, and lack of dialogue. Her voice is a product of her interiority; she is not heard by those around her. The ideal 17th century upper-class woman subscribed to fashion magazines, organized large parties, and lived with a wealthy aristocrat who, preferably, was well-versed in dance, music, and riding. As a wife, Emma is unsatisfied with her mediocre marriage with Charles and takes upon housewife duties only to impress her neighbors and illicit romantic interests. She yearns for the freedom and mobility to live in Paris; the only way to attain her goal is to deceive Charles. As a mother, she cares little for her child until she throws herself into a motherly role for show and self-pity, rather than for truly loving her daughter. She values little of her gender

and wishes for a son rather than a daughter, hoping that the idea of having a male child would be “a sort of hoped-for compensation for all her past helplessness.” She believes that a man can “explore every passion, every land, overcome obstacles, [and] taste the most distant pleasures,” but a woman is “continually thwarted.” (Madame Bovary 77) Her displeasure is indicated at the first mention of her daughter’s gender; Emma Bovary faints. The combined mother-wife role coupled with her inability to climb the social ladder renders Emma conflicted. She suffers from her unconscious and unfulfilled desires and expresses an erratic and promiscuous nature. An unhappy marriage, due to an unsuitable partner, forces her to live vicariously through fantasies. The “love” she idealizes is unrealistic; Emma characterizes it as sudden with “great thunderclaps and bolts of lightning” or a “hurricane from heaven that drops down on your life and overturns it” (Madame Bovary 87). This turmoil in psyche and the unconscious invites hackneyed illusions of romanticism, formed from her innate personality.

Beyond external limitations, Emma suffers from inherent narcissism. Romanticism is only a byproduct of her pathological narcissism and flight from realism, partially due to her reading. Frustration stems from the contrast between the imaginary bourgeois existence she is “destined” for and the unrealistic expectation cultivated by her books. Since childhood, Emma enamors herself with historical romance and dreams of living in old manors, spending her days sighing at a white-plumed horseman riding on his black steed, and sitting under trefoiled ogives. Her ardent veneration for ill-fated women such as Joan of Arc, Agnes Sorel, or Clemence Isaure foreshadow her future demise as she strives, without caution, to fulfill her bourgeoise dreams. (Madame Bovary 32) Furthermore, her external and individual psychology make it appear as if narcissism is a reactive phenomenon and an exalted conception of herself. As the German psychoanalyst Karen Horney describes it, Emma Bovary’s adult characteristics are due to her role as a only child, and her father’s belief that she was “gifted beyond average, favored and [the] admired child”. Her father believes she is too clever to farm, and Emma slowly cultivates a sense of superiority to her surroundings, which continues after marriage (Flaubert). After dismissing a previous servant for a trivial mistake, Emma employs a fourteen-year-old orphan and proceeds to “[forbid] her from wear[ing] cotton caps and teach[es] her [to] address one in the third person”, ultimately attempting to turn her into her own lady’s maid. (Madame Bovary 51). Those around Emma are forced to into those around her to subject themselves to her ideals and dreams. Emma also possess lofty claims and weak “shoulds”; as a Horneyan narcissist she is the idealized self and does not push to become who she feels she ought to be as a mother or wife. When her toddling daughter Berthe approaches her for attention, Emma, in a state of romantic dreaming, forces her away. As the girl repeatedly attempts to near her mother, Emma finally pushes her to the ground, causing Berthe to bleed. The excuse, “the baby was playing and has just fallen and hurt herself”, depicts Emma’s disinterest and detachment from her child. Due to her desires to confirm that feeling of “specialness” in the idealized image, she longs to live the bourgeoisie lifestyle and marry an aristocratic husband, even after her marriage with Charles Bovary (Thorpe). She continually pursues after a romantic relationship with Leon, Rodolphe, and even attempts to seduce the tax collector Binet after falling in extreme debt. Still, Emma has an unquestioned belief in her “greatness and uniqueness”, which leads to a false hope and attainment of these young illusions, or surface optimism, and undercurrents of pessimism from disappointments. Thus, her intense feeling of rage and despair appears.

Emma Bovary struggles with societal conformity. The societal oppression, narcissist thoughts, and growing discontent among the petty bourgeoisie influence her thoughts and desires. She seeks extramarital relationships to cope with her internal struggles, thus neglecting her family, finances, and inward focus.