

Name
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Mr. Rhinehart

IB Junior English

5/11/16

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How the Presence of Nature Imagery in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* Reflects the Societal Status of Women

12 pt. Times New Roman or similarly appropriate serif font

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In his late nineteenth-century novel *Madame Bovary*, French author Gustave Flaubert depicts the exploits of bourgeois adulteress Emma Bovary as she strives to find the perfect love that eludes her. While Emma is the central female in the novel, and is indeed the only woman described in great detail, Flaubert's tale speaks to the struggles of the whole female population as they work to break free from the restraints placed upon them by society. This sentiment is expressed throughout the novel as Flaubert employs the use of natural imagery, and the descriptive details and harsh diction used to portray it, to predict Emma's death, ultimately asserting that women are stifled and are unable to fully bloom in a society that refuses to provide them with the nourishment that they deserve.

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→ Flaubert employs the use of images of nature, portraying both seemingly thriving as well as dying flora, to prove his idea that women are often left without the opportunity of social mobility; they are confined to the societal expectations laid before them by males in society. This concept is exemplified by a passage in Chapter 9. On page 155 of the novel, Emma embarks on horseback ride with Rodolphe. However, she struggles to move forward as "tall ferns...ke[ep] catching in [her] stirrup," resulting in her needing Rodolphe's help to continue on her journey. He is described as "lean[ing] down" to remove the ferns, revealing that his status is higher than

Emma's due to his being a male. This is representative of how Emma's feelings of caution were quelled by the reassuring words of Rodolphe, and of how women in society are forced to rely on the men in their lives for protection, status, and stability. The images of the "patches of violet" and "wide spaces of heather in bloom" reflect the future bruising of Emma's heart and ego at the hands of her many lovers (Flaubert, 155). The description of the growth of the flowers as being "patches" and "wide spaces" reflect the "patchy" education received by Emma during her youth in the convent that created "wide spaces" in her understanding of the world, resulting in the romantic tendencies that consumed her until her death. These images reflecting growth ultimately work to assert that women's growth is stunted by the patriarchal expectations placed upon them which value domestic prowess and obedience over education, limiting women to a small area in which they can bloom, as well as with gaps between them and their typically better-educated male counterparts.

Along with images of living flora, Flaubert's inclusion of dying nature adds to the portrayal of Emma's death through nature imagery, as well as to the implications a demeaning society has a women.

On page 155, Flaubert writes of "gray, reddish-brown, or golden foliage," revealing that the trees, like Emma, are dying. The leaves, presumably about to fall, also reflect how the status of women is constantly lowered through the use of condescending and judgmental labels. The "tangled clumps of trees" (Flaubert, 155) portray a mangled corpse, proving that Emma's affair with Rodolphe helps pave the way to her future suicide. The idea of the trees representing a corpse also reflects the reduction of women from people to mere bodies, resulting in women having difficulty achieving upward mobility in a society that serves only to sexualize them.

In addition to dying nature imagery, the idea of the reduction of women from humans to

! Also, good use of transitions

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It's a fully formed analytical argument about cause & effect of literary device.

objects, as well as how Emma, feeling trapped by societal restraints such as these, resorts to suicide, is described by Flaubert through his use of descriptive details that serve to highlight the natural imagery in the novel. On page 47, Flaubert writes that “gentlemen with little flowers in their buttonholes were chatting with the ladies.” As flowers are typically a symbol of femininity, the detail of men carrying these flowers around and using them as decoration serves to portray the objectification of women. This also reveals that Charles Bovary ultimately married Emma because of her visual appeal and because of the potential boost in status he would receive through having a woman in his domain. These flowers, having been removed from the earth to become an ornament for men, are slowly dying, just as Emma’s health slowly deteriorates as her marriage to the oblivious Charles continues.

The objectification of women continues on page 47 as Flaubert describes the arrangement of “a row of bouquets from one end of the table to the other.” Due to the sexual connotations of the meal shown through other details in the passage (“fragrance of flowers...mingled with the odor of hot meat,” “steam rose from various parts of the table”), the detail of these flowers on the table alongside the food represents how Emma is seen as nothing more than a meal to be consumed by the men that surround her, foreshadowing how she is eventually drained by her lovers (Flaubert, 66). The detail of the flowers being in “a row” reveals how women are expected to look and act a certain way; conformity to supposedly “ladylike” behaviors and appearances is encouraged.

Flaubert continues to highlight how this objectification, along with the restrictions and expectations placed upon Emma, cause her to act out violently by taking her own life through the harsh diction used by Flaubert to discuss the natural imagery in the novel. The use of the word “yellowed” to describe Emma’s wedding bouquet in the phrase “[t]he orange-blossomed buds

were yellowed with dust” reveals the sickness that will overtake Emma, as the color yellow is associated with illness (Flaubert, 66). “Yellowed” could also be commentary on the societal necessity for women to remain “pure”, and how their worth is directly related to this; Emma’s flowers were tainted, just as she was viewed as being tainted because she chose to indulge in her romantic passions and, in doing so, ruined her reputation. It is important to note that the flowers in Emma’s wedding bouquet are made of paper; thus, their artificiality represents the poor quality of life women are forced to endure as they cater to the will of their fathers and eventually, their husbands. Their artificiality also represents the face women put on in order to impress the public; they must suppress their true emotions and opinions in order to avoid being ridiculed by the general population. This concept is portrayed through Flaubert’s use of the word “shriveled” in the phrase, “the shriveled paper petals” (Flaubert, 66). Not only does this word describe the draining of Emma by the men in her life, but it also describes how women may in fact make themselves figuratively smaller by refusing to assert their ideas and opinions. The use of the word “burst” in the phrase “[t]he little cardboard berries burst in open” refers to the moment that Emma finally snaps under the weight of her unachievable desires, and hastily makes the decision to commit suicide (Flaubert, 66). “Burst” also refers to the deflation of women as they are forced into a lower social status than their male counterparts.

In conclusion, in the novel *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, readers are exposed to the hardships experienced by the promiscuous Emma Bovary as she struggles to take control of her existence, especially her romantic inclinations, in a society that refuses to grant her the freedom she so strongly desires. Unfortunately, Emma is unable to attain this liberty for herself, and responds to her entrapment by committing suicide. The tale of Emma is echoed in less dramatic, but just as harmful, ways in reality as women are forced to exist in a world that does

not nourish their growth. Flaubert asserts this idea through his use of natural imagery, which represents the entrapment of women in society and foreshadows Emma Bovary's death, and aids the reader in understanding this topic through the support of the descriptive details and harsh diction placed alongside images of nature.

Word Count: 1317

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Works Cited

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Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Trans. Lowell Bair. Ed. Leo Bersani. New York: Random House, 2005. Print.



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