

Realistic Literature: Flaubert and Balzac

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The Nineteenth Century Literary Scene: Growth in Readership

- “The growth of the middle classes, who now possessed leisure for reading and money for books, led to a huge reading public seeking to improve their minds and ready to enjoy the leisurely pace of the novel. Testifying to their voracious appetite for reading were the advent of lending libraries, the burgeoning trade in periodicals that serialized novels, and the popularity of authors like Dickens, Hugo, and Balzac, whose books were eagerly devoured within weeks of their publication.” Gentrain Syllabus
- Two Responses to Tremendous Changes in Society: Romantic (escapist) and Realist (objective depiction of world as it is; usually critical and cynical)

Realistic

- Narrative Point of View: Narrative Objective;
“In my book I do not want there to be a single movement, or a single reflection of the author”
(letter to Louise Colet, 1852)
- Shows us rather than tells us how to judge various scenes and characters
- Wide Range of Characters
- Romantic Values of Emotionalism and Passion are depicted in all their aspects
- Capitalism and industrialism are unveiled in their ugliness—commercialism and exploitation

Definition of Realism

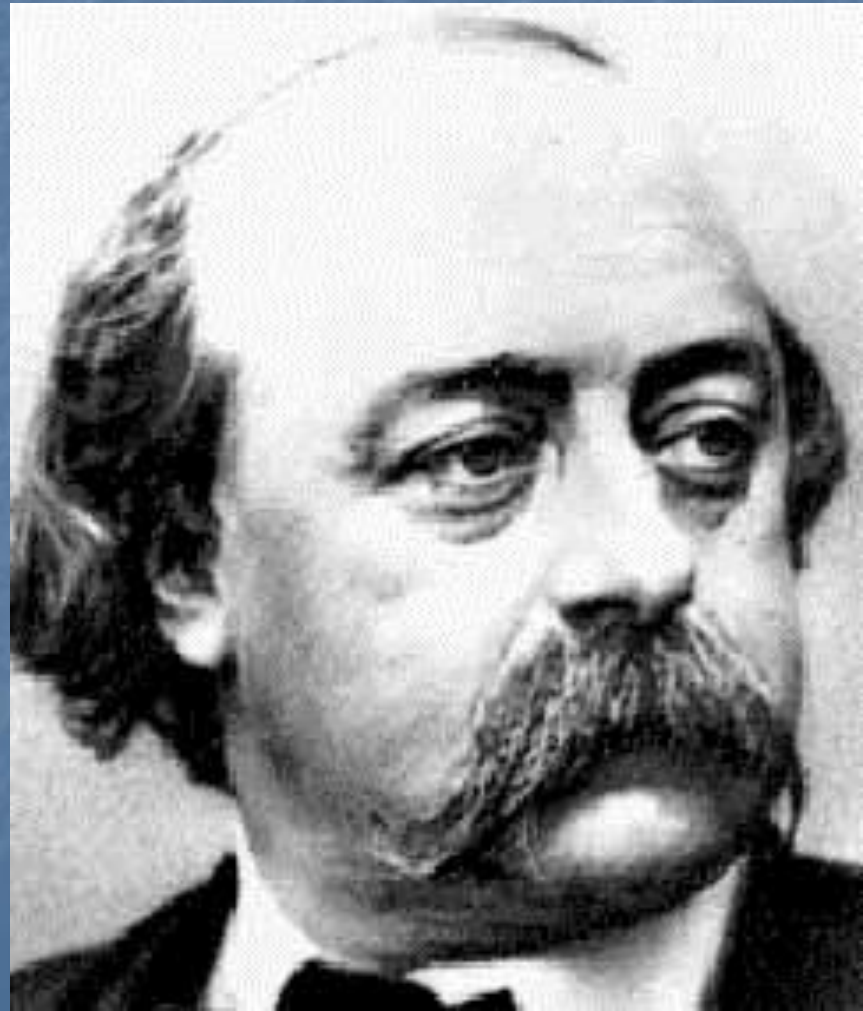
- A type of novel characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism by representing **complex characters** with **mixed motives** who are **rooted in a social class**, operate in a **highly developed social structure**, interact with many other characters, and undergo **plausible and everyday modes of experience**.
- Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms

Honore de Balzac (1799-1850):

- The Humane Comedy, 90 short stories and novellas and novels
- Eugénie Grandet, 1833: miserliness passed on as an inheritance
- Le Père Goriot, 1835: "Rastignac," the protagonist, is synonymous with a bright young man determined to succeed at any cost. Pere Goriot is a modern King Lear—daughters use him for his money, but don't attend his funeral!
- Illusions perdues: 1837, 1839: Lucien, a provincial, attempts to enter Parisian high society
- "These novels reflect the life of his time faithfully...the world of money, the sham and hypocrisy of the rich and the opportunists, vicious passions and delusions of a sick society are Balzac's true subject." Gentrain syllabus

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)

- Born the son of a wealthy doctor
- Educated to be a lawyer but dropped out due to epilepsy
- Never married; affair with poetess, Louise Colet
- He traveled to Greece, Egypt, Carthage
- Moved in literary circle that included George Sand, Emile Zola, Turgenev
- *Madame Bovary*, 1856
- *Salammbô*, 1863; Carthaginian General, Hamilcar
- *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1870); story of Frédéric Moreau, a young lawyer infatuated with Madame Marie Arnoux; backdrop of the 1848 Revolution.



Censorship for Immorality

- Baudelaire's six poems in *Les Fleur du mal*, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* were banned during the mid 19th century.
- Flaubert and his publisher were tried for immorality because of *Madame Bovary*. They won the trial, but the ordeal made Flaubert even more resentful of Bourgeois Morality.

Bourgeois Morality

- Traditional and morally conservative
- The Myth of the Ideal Family
- Love and Marriage go Together
- Conformist: the tyranny of the majority
- Hard work pays off
- A man is measured by his possessions and wealth
- Whatever can turn a profit is good
- The Poor are morally corrupt
- Vulgar taste in art and literature: promotes mediocrity; unwillingness to take risks

Story Summary

- Charles Bovary's childhood and first marriage to a widow
- Meets Emma
- Marriage and Ball; Boredom and Depression
- Move to Yonville: Emma meets Leon; he leaves; At the Fair, she is seduced by Rodolphe
- Homais, Operation on Clubfoot, Hippolyte;
- Lheureux, money lender, debt
- Rodolphe abandons her
- At opera in Rouen, encounters Leon; two week affair
- To escape the sale of property, she appeals to Leon and Rodolphe for money
- Commits suicide by eating arsenic
- Charles learns the truth about Emma from her letters; he dies and Berthe goes to a cotton mill

Tragedy of Money and Bourgeois Values

- Emma's father is a farmer, but she longs for the material symbols of bourgeois class and status;
- Partly to recreate her imaginary notions of what an aristocratic life might be she purchases unnecessary things; Map of Paris; Magazines that describe the lifestyle of Paris Elite;
- Led into Debt to acquire these items; almost out of boredom
- Desire for the unattainable mirrors the capitalistic desire for what we do not have

Irony of Bourgeois Values

- Lacking in Sophistication and Imagination: Dramatic Irony during Fair as Emma is seduced (107 ff);
- Contrast between agricultural auction and seduction
- Contrast between Rodolphe's romantic words and the dry, boring words about economics of the Mayor. (103

Bovarysme in *Madame Bovary*

- Emma read romantic novels in the nunnery that fuel her insatiable desire for romantic love (p. 24)
- The ball they attend at the Marquis' is the greatest moment of her life;
- Experiences sadness at Romantic Disillusionment as she realizes the distance of her life from Vaubyessard (the site of the ball). (p. 40)
- Sense of disconnect from world you inhabit—romantic fantasy: p.42

Gender Issues

- Hopes her baby will be a boy (p. 63)
- Men have power to act, move, take charge of their life: Leon leaves Yonville for Rouen; Rodolphe is a wealthy aristocrat; Charles has his career; Image of Window as a Symbol of her longing (p. 86)
- The only venue women can exercise choice is marriage and love affairs
- In all her actions with men she sells her only commodity, her sexual charms

Symbols

- Window—the isolation and impotence of a woman
- Lathe, producing iron napkin rings: Bourgeois productivity and purposelessness; mindless repetition
- Tapping of Hippolyte's amputated leg: the failure of Bovary and Homais; the inevitability of death, which is ignored in bourgeois society
- Blind Beggar's Song: "birds and sunshine and green leaves"; After Emma's death we hear the complete song and realize it is a bawdy song

Summary

- Ironic Parody of both Romanticism and Bourgeois Pragmatism; the two polar ideologies mutually undermine each other
- Rather than being immoral, this is a moral warning: depicts the failure of adultery or consumerism to satisfy the inner longing created by bourgeois values on the one hand, or romantic values on the other
- Realistic depiction of the boredom of everyday life; Bovarysme
- Realistic Method: Showing rather than telling; objective narrative
- Part of a movement that was begun by Balzac: Realism