

Sample Analytic Essay

My Big Fat French Wedding: The Significance of Parties in *Madame Bovary*

The details in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* can become excruciatingly meticulous, making it difficult to focus on such a fastidious text. One such instance of particular boredom occurs in part one, chapter four, during Emma and Charles' wedding scene. It took what seemed like hours to read this five page chapter, specifically pages 23-25. Every exhaustive detail about the guests, the horses, the dessert array, turned what could have been a fascinating and enjoyable part of the story into a frustrating one. Although one of the most important events of the novel in that it connects Charles and Emma forever, these three pages seem to go in depth on nothing important to the rest of the story. However, this wedding is a catalyst for the novel, in that it describes to the reader the things Emma is unhappy with in her life-specifically her social status and her husband- prior to the reader knowing anything about Emma's thoughts or feelings. The reader can understand the entire novel better by using the wedding as a lens, because the wedding foreshadows much of the rest of the story, especially Emma's discontentment with her life and social position. All of this occurs unbeknownst to both the reader and the characters upon first reading.

This essay will reference boredom numerous times. The first instance of the word boredom, interestingly related to *Madame Bovary*, was used to a bored woman in, 3 years before *Madame Bovary* was published. I'll describe the state of being bored as weariness. Throughout this passage, weariness is something the reader struggles with, leading to them not wanting to read on.

We understand Emma's dissatisfaction with her place in life through her wedding, but in the context of the rest of the novel. During the actual wedding scene, we don't get any insight into Emma's feelings, with the exception of her imploring her father to stop the customary wedding pranks. We do not think that we begin to understand Emma until she's already married in the next chapter. However, during the wedding, we can get insight into Charles' feelings. This illustrious wedding proves a contrast between that of Charles and his first wife: their meeting was organized by his mother, their wedding not described, and their marriage cold and disdainful. Here, the wedding is full of light, joy, and food. This contrast shows the hopefulness and love with which this marriage begins.

Flaubert uses clothing to display the economically diverse array of guests attending Emma's wedding, in order to establish Emma's position in French society. In the excerpt from 23-24, there is over a page of thorough description of the wedding guests' clothing and appearances. French society in the mid 1800s was structured by class, so the fact that they all mingle together in such a way is an interesting point that Flaubert chose to include, in that it shows how Emma and Charles are not descended from exceptionally wealthy families. The narrator describes their attire in one long, listing sentence that goes on for half of a page. It starts with the richest of the guests, "good tailcoats, embraced by a family's highest esteem and taken from the cupboard only on solemn occasions;"(23) which are described in a dramatic nature to show off their impressiveness and luxuriousness. The wealthy come first and take up the most space in the sentence, just as they would in France. Following that, we are introduced to the middle class, "very short cutaways, with two buttons in the back set close together like a pair of eyes and panels that seemed to have been cut from a single block of wood by a carpenter's ax." (23) This section is interesting because Flaubert explicitly uses a simile, something he rarely

does in the entire novel. By comparing the buttons on the jacket of the middle class person to a pair of eyes, Flaubert is hinting at the purgatory that Emma will find herself in later on in the novel, always watching the wealthy and elite, but never quite getting there. The imagery of the ax cutting the panels in half exemplifies the difference between the middle class from the upper class in that the middle class is still working and experiencing the harshness of manual labor. Finally, the sentence dismissively ends with the lower class: “a few others still (but these, of course, would be dining at the foot of the table) were wearing dress smocks.”(24) The abrupt and little description of the lower class shows how they’re not taken seriously and looked down upon. The listing nature of the sentence is boring upon first reading, but its structure becomes interesting. It shows the humble background the engaged couple come from, with both having families from rural farming towns. This excerpt establishes the class conflict in Emma’s life in a creative way, through costume, without explicitly saying it.

The excessiveness of the wedding leads us to believe that Emma has lived a luxurious life, but upon a closer reading, we can see the crudeness behind it. The gaudiness of the banquet is described in detail: “Large plates of yellow custard that quivered at the slightest knock to the table displayed, on their smooth surfaces, the initials of the newlyweds drawn in arabesques of nonpareils.”(25) The imagery of this sentence, particularly the word “quivered,” gives off an overflowing sense of luxury. It also shows a drastic change in Charles’ life a few chapters before, when he was struggling to make ends meet while studying to be a doctor. However, while the wedding contains luxurious things such as the dessert array and the dinner, it seems put together in an informal manner. The paragraph that describes the banquet starts with the sentence: “It was in the cart shed that the table had been set up.”(25) This feast takes place in a garage, which clashes greatly with the scene at La Vaubyessard, which happens just a few chapters later. We

can understand, upon further reading of the novel, that these details provide insight into the fact that Emma's life, while containing small luxuries, isn't quite at the level that she wants it to be.

Whatever wealth we had initially thought to be on display at Emma's wedding pales in comparison to that of the party at La Vaubyessard, displaying a major conflict in Emma's life: her social status. This scene and Emma's attitude after it prove that she wants more and feels slighted by her position in life. Her family gave her all that they could at her wedding, her father wanting to make her as happy as he possibly could. Still, this was not enough for Emma, and we only truly begin to understand this longing in the context of La Vaubyessard. The description of the exquisiteness of the banquet makes the dinner at the wedding seem pathetic: "The red claws of the lobsters overhung the edges of the platters; large fruits were piled on on moss in openwork baskets;..." (41) and the details go on. The similar structure of the wedding and the party scenes, with their listing sentences and excessive description, make it impossible not to compare the two.

Emma's behavior at La Vaubyessard shows just how separate from the upper class she is, and how much she cares about her social status. When Emma first arrives at the party, as she is admiring the paintings that line the halls, the narrator says: "Then one could barely make out those that came after, because the light from the lamps, directed down onto the green cloth of the billiards table, left the room floating in shadow. (41)" This is an important analogy because this world is cast in shadow for Emma. Emma does not and cannot know what is down that hall, with the lives of the elite that she longs to be a part of hung up on the wall. Instead, the light is directed down, and Emma has to struggle to glimpse up at what she yearns for. Emma spent her night observing every detail she could from this experience: "Madame Bovary noticed that several of the ladies had not put their gloves in their glasses..." (42). This sentence shows that Emma does not understand the place she's in. She's observing it all, focusing on maintaining her

image with learning as much as she can about how these women act. The narrator addresses Emma as “Madame Bovary” here, growing more detached and attributing her title to the formal setting. This is the life Emma yearns to live in, but at this party, she’s an outsider.

The characters described at Emma’s wedding can be related to those at La Vaubyessard through Emma’s opinion of them, to show Emma’s disdain for her current life. The characters of the lower class, such as her fishmonger cousin pulling a prank on her, are described in a foolish context, with Emma begging her father to save her from such absurdities. Emma obviously abhors her status and the customs of her family. However, Emma comes to idolize an adulterer, whose behavior seems much more despicable than pranks. Amidst the dinner scene, we get a description of the Marquis’ father-in-law, who was a supposed lover of Marie Antoinette:

“...Emma’s eyes returned again and again of their own accord to this old man with his pendulous lips, as to something extraordinary and august. He had lived in the Court and slept in the beds of queens!...” (42). This man, an adulterer, who is being portrayed by the narrator as “like a child” (42), is admired by Emma, simply for his rumored elitist life. Through free indirect discourse we see that Emma commends his adultery, when she exclaims his affair. This is perhaps foreshadowing the rest of the novel: a man who had it all, got most of his fame through having an affair with the queen of France. Emma, who wants nothing more than to become part of this lavish life, could see adultery not as a sin, but a gateway to a new class. This man justifies her further actions in Emma’s mind. Even though the Duc de Lavedière has committed sins far worse than playing pranks, Emma admires him because of the extreme wealth and status that comes with this adultery. For her to idolize this man but despise her cousin proves Emma’s bias towards the upper class and her disgust in the lower. Emma constantly wants what she cannot have.

The first reading of a large part of *Madame Bovary* is accompanied by boredom. However, upon a deeper look, the reader can see incredible symbolism and foreshadowing throughout this novel, as seen in the excerpt from the wedding scene. Flaubert presents “easter eggs” throughout his novel to hint at the rest of the story, but it’s impossible to enjoy such delights without reading the entire book. The wedding scene, especially in comparison to the party at La Vaubyessard, gives context to help us understand Emma’s character and point of view better. Through the drastic difference between the two parties, we are given one of the few moments in the book where we can empathize with Emma, although we may not necessarily agree with her. The life she dreams of is just out of her reach, and she is constantly yearning for more and more. This is just as relatable for the modern reader as it would have been for one in 19th century France; after all, don’t people always want what they cannot have?