

Sample Analytic Essay

Careless Whispers: Deceitful Dialogue in *Madame Bovary*

During the agricultural fair in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the narrator seems to contrast Rodolphe's grand declaration of love for Emma with a dull speech by the Prefect's Representative (128-130). Upon closer analysis, however, it becomes apparent that the narrator does not contrast these two speeches, but rather presents them as parallels. The narrator places these speeches side by side for the purpose of sarcastic emphasis, portraying both speeches as empty rhetoric used to convince their listeners of something other than the truth. As a key component of Flaubert's realism, he expresses that human speech rarely conveys anything true about the speaker or subject matter, and is therefore often a conduit for hypocrisy.

Literary Realism is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without the embellishment of elaborate artistic conventions and implausible elements. It seeks to portray everyday life and people as the average person may experience it, as unromantic and unadorned. *Madame Bovary* is heralded as a classic realist work. The achingly laborious descriptions and Emma's unrelenting boredom serve as examples of Flaubert's unwavering attempt to represent life as ordinary as possible. Despite this, most of the characters are wholly romantic, none of whom more so than Emma. Her dependency on her romance novels, her sentimentality for her past (i.e. the longing for her convent), and her belief that fate has something more for her than her drab existence are discernable romantic traits. This contrast is seen during the agricultural fair. Rodolphe talks of he and Emma's romance as coming together "because fate demands it and they were born for each other" (128). The gravity of their conversation suggests intimacy and romance, yet the square is "packed right up to the housefronts" (127), and sheep and cattle "lowed from time to time even as they reached out with tongues and tore off a scrap of foliage

hanging down over their muzzles” (128). Through this mundane description, the narrator reminds the reader that despite Rodolphe’s passionate words, the scene surrounding the lovers is neither intimate nor romantic. Furthermore, realist representations like this one undermine the genuineness of romantic dialogue, for the reader is already aware that Rodolphe is lying. In fact, every word that he says as he is supposedly professing his love bears no truth whatsoever. He seduces Emma for his own amusement, and is prepared to leave her heartbroken when he gets bored or when she becomes too clingy, whichever comes first.

Rodolphe employs the rhetoric of romantic love in order to manipulate and seduce Emma. His carefully chosen phrases invoke “the eternal monotony of passion, which always assumes the same forms and uses the same language” (167). He appeals to Emma’s preferred language of sentimental abstraction, talking to her “about dreams, presentiments,” and “magnetism,” gradually moving on to their mutual “affinities,” namely, their shared ennui and resentment towards life’s banality (129). Emma is satisfied with this similarity, as her notions of reality are derived from her romance novels instead of from her own experiences. Moreover, she never adjusts her own experiences to compliment these ideals. Reminders of her past disappointments give her pause. In the smell of Rodolphe’s cologne, she recalls “the vicomte who had waltzed with her at La Vaubyessard,” the night in which she glimpsed into the grandeur of the aristocracy, never to return to it (128). Then she sights the *Hirondelle* in the distance, and she briefly reminisces of her secret love for Léon, and the passions that were never realized. All this fades as she returns to Rodolphe’s scent, and “the sweetness of this sensation permeated her desires of earlier times” (128). Emma’s romantic ideals have betrayed her before. Nevertheless, she chooses abstraction over experience and succumbs to Rodolphe’s adulterous temptation, transfixed by his every lie.

Meanwhile, the Prefect's Representative delivers a flowery speech, exalting the history of labor and agriculture. This, too, is frothy rhetoric, filled with platitudes and clichés instead of any meaningful content. The townspeople are “venerable servants” and “humble workers,” feeling reassured that “the State, henceforth, has its eyes fixed upon [them]” (129). These exaggerations exemplify romantic dialogue, evidenced by the historical context of the novel, when ideas of social and political transformation inspired by the French Revolution were prevalent in public discourse. The Representative, well aware of the hatred toward the aristocracy, is working to gain the peoples' trust with praise rather than action. The Councilor then begins to recount the history of agriculture: citing ancient Roman and Chinese innovations. Employing dramatic irony, the narrator states that the speech was very well received by the townspeople for “its more specialized knowledge and loftier considerations,” when none of what the Councilor is saying has anything to do with the people of Yonville (129). The Representative and Councilor's speeches are delivered as if they have been given to a hundred other towns like Yonville, and as their form and intent stand in parallel to Rodolphe's, one gets the impression that Rodolphe's speech has been given to a hundred other women like Emma.

Rodolphe is able to manipulate Emma for this reason. He does not mention anything specific to her reality, which is perfect for Emma, as she spends most of her time trying to escape it anyway. Without reference to fact, or to the complexity and confusion of real life, Rodolphe proposes the solution to Emma's boredom. The Councilor's words become inextricably linked with Rodolphe's, both working together to highlight one another's insincerity.

“A hundred times I've tried to leave you, and yet I've followed you, I've stayed with you.”

“For manures—“

“As I would stay with you tonight, tomorrow, every day, my whole life!”

“To Monsieur Caron, of Argueil, a gold medal!” (130)

Just as Rodolphe's avowal reaches its climax, as he asserts his undying love, the Councilor is heard saying "manure" in the background. The narrator, in this unsubtle moment, emphasizes the absurdity of Rodolphe's grand gesture. Nevertheless, Emma surrenders to Rodolphe's charm, and the intertwined speeches conclude as the lovers sit "softly, effortlessly," with "their fingers intertwined" (130). Throughout the passage, the narrator consistently affirms Rodolphe's lies. The narrator is the reader's insight into what to believe and what to discount, and so far, they have framed most of the novel's dialogue as insincere. Therefore, what are we to believe when a character appears to convey the truth?

When Rodolphe has successfully entered an affair with Emma, it is revealed that he is also wary of romantic dialogue. Just as he is aware that his words contain no depth, he also struggles to find meaning in the words of others, in particular, Emma's proclamations of the intensity of her love and devotion. She sounds like all his other mistresses. In fact, she sounds like Rodolphe during the agricultural fair. Rodolphe proclaims that he "would stay with [Emma] tonight, tomorrow, every day, [his] whole life" (130), Emma reciprocates with similar exaggerations: "I love you so much I can't do without you" (167). Emma believes her feelings of love are genuine, yet Rodolphe, whose novelty for such speeches has long worn away, cannot believe such rhetoric. Exaggerated and amorous language has become as ordinary and cyclical as the realist setting in which they are spoken. Therefore, Rodolphe, the self-purported liar, makes an observation on language: that hyperbolic and frivolous speech cannot be trusted.

One had to discount, he thought, exaggerated speeches that concealed commonplace affections, as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest of metaphors, since none of us can ever express the exact measure of our needs, or our ideas, or our sorrows, and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when we long inspire pity in the stars. (167)

This passage is an example of the power of free indirect discourse. Although Rodolphe is not talking directly, the use of "he thought" indicates that what follows is Rodolphe's perspective.

This scene with Rodolphe allows Flaubert to comment on his own perceptions without restoring to narrative voice. It is a paradoxical moment, because Rodolphe's main purpose is as a vehicle for deception, yet suddenly, the reader is expected to believe him. In the absence of appearances and the repetitive rhetoric of romanticism, Rodolphe appears genuine. Therefore, there are exceptions to Flaubert's rule; characters are capable of conveying the truth. Nevertheless, Rodolphe's fleeting sincerity affirms the theme that the omniscient narrator emphasizes throughout the novel, particularly during the agricultural fair: that much like a "cracked kettle," human speech is inadequate.

The contrast of narrative realism with romantic dialogue renders human speech insincere, and establishes that only through narration will the truth be revealed. Narrative perspective makes this discrepancy between dialogue and truth painstakingly obvious to the reader, which is further exacerbated by Emma's inability to see through Rodolphe's lies. However, in literary realism one only gets a view of the world as told by the narrator. Every episode and incident in carefully selected so that "realism," in and of itself, is somewhat misleading. Every detail in *Madame Bovary* is given for a purpose; every moment linked to the events that precedes and follows it, or in the case of the agricultural fair, linked to the events happening concurrently. It is this tension between romanticism and realism that allows Flaubert to capture characters and their struggles more fully than strictly either style would allow. Emma is a victim of romanticism, and her desperate search for an fantastical love acts as a vehicle to infuse a language that is equally dissonant with her reality. Rodolphe is victim of the repetitiveness of realism, and is unable to distinguish genuine human emotion from the lies he tells his mistresses. The paralleled speeches during the agricultural fair expose this element of Flaubert's style, and therefore, their significance cannot be ignored.