

MADAME BOVARY

BY ADRIENNE KENNEDY

C'est moi By Danielle Georgiou



Omar Padilla, Jim Jorgensen, Stephanie Cleghorn Jasso, Jamal Sterling and Rhonda Boutté
Photo: Stephen Webster

Approaching the literary classic *Madame Bovary* as a case study on the rise of modernism and feminism, we find ourselves with something that functions as a sort of cautionary tale—an examination of compassion and how it can both destroy and expands the soul. At the start of his novel, Gustave Flaubert presents a woman who exhibits immense vanity, overwhelming selfishness, passion, intense love, and a desire to travel and experience life. But a woman trapped—be it in her mind, in a web of her own doing, in a life she never expected to lead. By the end of the novel, Flaubert asks us to consider what it means to sacrifice everything for a dream. Is the grass always greener on the other side?

The publication of the novel, which first appeared in installments in *La Revue de Paris* in 1856, was initially contested by the French government, which charged Flaubert, his printer, and his publisher with blasphemy and offense against public morals. Eventually, the government dropped the charges, but the notoriety has followed the novel, keeping it at the forefront of our literary minds. A place that is in part cemented by the fact that *Madame*

Bovary reads like it was written yesterday; its concerns reflect and, in many ways, anticipate our own.

Meet Emma Bovary

How Flaubert came to invent a woman who is so quintessentially female is a mystery. However, the literary gender-bending act that he accomplished might have given us one of the most accurate depictions of a modern woman—a woman who embraces her desires and *acts like a man*.

The truth is that Emma, with her visions of a grander life and resplendent passions, is just like all of us—or at least, some part of us. She embodies that feeling of wanderlust simmering just below the surface when we realize that the prosaic reality we have dreamed about is not quite what we bargained for.

In *The Perpetual Orgy*, Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas-Llosa says that *Madame Bovary* gives us “the first signs of the alienation that a century later will take hold of men and women in industrial societies.” He goes on to explain that the situations detailed by Flaubert show us how consumption is “an outlet for anxiety, the attempt to people with objects the emptiness that modern life has made a permanent feature of the existence of the individual.”

Perhaps the most apparent aspect of this perceived alienation is the condition of anomie, or “atrocious ennui,” as Flaubert called it, which plagued the author, his heroine, and runs rampant in contemporary society. The anxiety of choice that hangs over our heads can be debilitating—the idea that there is someone or something better out there—leading us to make no choice at all, or to make one final, tragic decision.

Emma chose to disappear inside the fantasies of the romantic novels she avidly consumed, delving deep into her lush escapist daydreams. Going so far as to exploring what life could be if it was full of “bliss, passion, and intoxication,” and finding herself unable to distinguish fact from fiction. If only she has been able to separate herself from the texts, to understand that words are just words, her life would have turned out differently.



Stephanie Cleghorn
Jasso as Emma Bovary

Photo: Julia DePasquale

The Kennedy Influence

What is interesting about Flaubert's perspective on his work is that he did not set out to create a narrative that informed or persuaded; in fact, he never once tells us how to feel about the characters. Instead, what we have is an articulated and illustrated story that sets out to produce a "slice of life." Ironically, we have spent countless years studying the novel, dissecting its every nuance, and formulating adaptation after adaptation. It is here that playwright Adrienne Kennedy picks up the story, equally staying out of the way of the characters, but giving us a new insight into their lives, through the voice of Berthe, Emma's young daughter, her husband Charles' memories, and Emma's internal dialogue.



Adrienne Kennedy

"I like Emma," wrote Adrienne Kennedy in a message to director Bruce DuBose, "she is at a loss as to how to spend her life." Drawing from inspirational films such as the 1949 version of *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre* (1943), *Great Expectations* (1946), *Gaslight* (1944) *The Red Shoes* (1948), Kennedy has created a contemporary examination of a European classic. The script leaps off the page with dramatic imagery, layered metaphors, and relatable situations. Much like the heroine in *The Red Shoes*, Victoria Page, Kennedy's Emma is intense, excitable, and utterly possessed by her single-minded pursuit of her passions.

**"I like Emma,
she is at a
loss as to
how to spend
her life"**

~ADRIENNE KENNEDY TO
DIRECTOR BRUCE DUBOSE

There is a brutality that Kennedy brings forward that is not as apparent in Flaubert's novel but is precisely accurate to the female experience—women exist in a binary between being the perfect wife/caregiver and being an ideal version of themselves. We will destroy ourselves at all costs to follow our dreams. Kennedy's Emma recklessly pursues the pleasure of sex and shopping, of entertainment and vices, only to find herself trapped in an endless cycle of desire and destitute, behavior that leads to dire results.

Views of the novel have changed over time, from seeing it as a condemnation of bourgeois society to an exposé on the constricted role of women in a patriarchal culture to an examination of the depressive effects of modern society. But what we ultimately learn from Emma is to be human, to be resilient; to live forth in a world that judges us for our flights of fancy and disregard for ordinary obligations, and sympathizes with our desire to transcend the painful monotony of our daily lives.

She is endearing. She is contemptible. She is real. She is me. She is you.



Stephanie Cleghorn Jasso as Emma Bovary and
Jim Jorgensen as Charles Bovary

Photo: Julia DePasquale

Sources:

Vargas Llosa, Mario. *The Perpetual Orgy*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987.
Davis, Lydia, translator. *Madame Bovary*. By Gustave Flaubert. Viking, 2010.