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*Madame Bovary*

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## An introduction from Reverend Professor Russell Goulbourne

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) is the story of a woman trapped in an unsatisfactory marriage in a dull provincial French town in the 1830s. So far, so ordinary: in its portrayal of provincial life at a specific historical moment, focusing in particular on the fate of a woman in patriarchal society, the novel sounds not very different from many of the Realist novels that preceded it in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as those of Honoré de Balzac.

And yet, this text – Flaubert's debut – marks a turning point in the history of the modern novel. This masterclass, marking the bicentenary of Flaubert's birth, will explore the ways in which the text departs radically from what had gone before and just why Flaubert can now be seen as the father of the modern novel. Flaubert takes an ordinary, apparently uninteresting subject, but treats it in an extraordinary way: the subject-matter may be slender, but the novel is a truly great book by dint of its style, its language, its narrative techniques, its shifting points of view, its structure and its refusal to offer unambiguous moral lessons.

Flaubert's aim in writing *Madame Bovary* was to make his readers think, to open their minds to different ways of viewing and interpreting reality: this masterclass will demonstrate just how successful Flaubert was in realising that aim as we come to understand the reasons why, when reading the novel – with its artful ambiguity, slippery language and complex mixture of pathos and irony – we can never really know how to understand what is happening.



[Russell Goulbourne](#) completed his MA, MSt and DPhil at Keble College, Oxford. He then taught in the Department of French at the University of Leeds between 2000 and 2013, first as a Lecturer (2000-05), then as a Senior Lecturer (2005-06) and then as Professor of Early Modern French Literature (2006-13); he also served as Head of Department from 2008 to 2011.

In January 2014 he moved to King's College London as Professor of French Literature and was Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Humanities from January 2014 to August 2018. In January 2019 he joined the University of Melbourne as Professor of French Literature and was Dean of the Faculty of Arts from January 2019 to January 2024.

## Extra resources

[Madame Bovary, In Our Time, BBC Radio 4](#) (2007)

This episode of BBC Radio 4's podcast series is devoted to the scandal caused by *Madame Bovary*.

[Monsieur Flaubert, C'est Moi!](#) (published in French, use Google Chrome to translate) (2009)

In this essay, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's acknowledges his own debt to Flaubert, whom he situates as one of the very first modernist writers.



Illustration for *Madame Bovary* by Alfred de Richemont, 1885

## Discussion questions

- What judgements do you find yourself making of the main characters? What aspects of the text prompt you to make these judgements? And how, if at all, do your judgements vary in the course of the novel?
- How would you describe the style of the novel? What images strike you most? And what patterning do you perceive in Flaubert's use of these images?
- How helpful might it be to think of Flaubert as a 'poetic realist'? To what extent do you think he has succeeded in creating something beautiful out of something ugly and disordered?

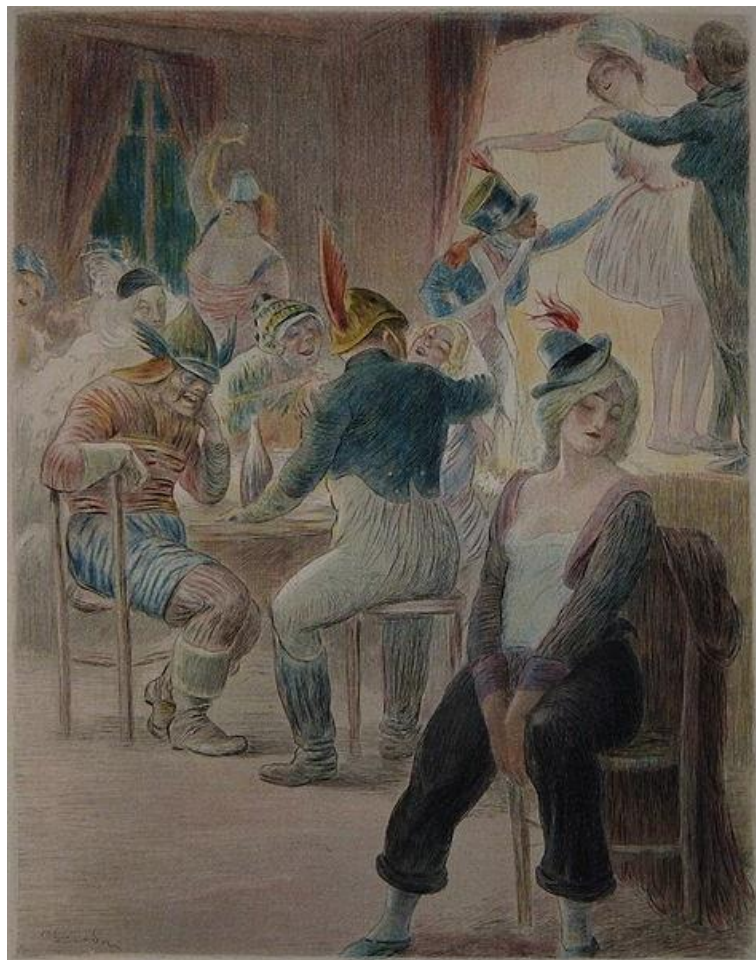


Illustration for *Madame Bovary* by Charles Léandre etched in colour by Eugène Decisy, 1931