



## Madame Bovary, by Gustave Flaubert

### In A Nutshell

You've probably heard of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Maybe it's because you caught a re-run of some old French movie version of it super late one night, or perhaps you've seen a beat-up copy of it lying around from your parents' school days. Why is it so famous? Well, first of all, the book made a huge splash when it was first published. The novel originally appeared in installments in a magazine called *La Revue de Paris* in 1856, which caught the eye of the censors. As a result, Flaubert was put on trial in January of 1857 for obscenity; the novel seemed too risqué for the tastes of the government. The trial actually had the opposite effect to the one the authorities had hoped for; after Flaubert was acquitted, the book became a smash hit.

After its tempestuous birth, *Madame Bovary* continued to make waves in the literary scene. It's seen as one of the best examples of the Realist novel (see more in "Genre"), and its influence was strongly felt in the decades that followed. In the novel, Flaubert takes us to a level of intimacy and familiarity with his characters that was unimaginable before he came along; even if we don't like the characters or don't think they're doing the right thing, we still feel incredibly close to them.

Even today, Flaubert's masterpiece is still going strong. In 2007, a book called *The Top Ten* polled 125 famous authors for their top 10 books of all time and constructed a master list from all of their input. *Madame Bovary* came in second place, a most impressive finish, only behind

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*Anna Karenina.*

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What claims does *Madame Bovary* make for the role of women in the society of Flaubert's time?
- 2 How does the novel's narrative voice contribute to its effectiveness?
- 3 How sympathetic (or unsympathetic) are we to the novel's main characters? How does this affect our reading of the novel?

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