

FLAUBERT, GUSTAVE

Gustave Flaubert: his place in French Literature. Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) was the most artistic of the great realist novelists of nineteenth century France, and exercised extraordinary influence over such followers as de Maupassant, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, and Emile Zola. He set benchmark standards for purity of prose expression and care for literary structure.

The Life and Writings of Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert was born in Rouen, in Normandy, and except for a few years of travel, as a young man, he lived either in Rouen or in the nearby town of Croisset, where he died. By the age of eight he was immersed in his writing projects, which he carried with him to the Lycée Pierre Corneille. (He was also busy absorbing the ambience of the medical world, which he picked up from his father, a physician, and would apply generously to some of his best work in fiction.) An attempt by his father to make a lawyer of him (1840-45) was a failure, not least because toward the end of his legal studies he was assailed with an attack of epilepsy, one of a number of ailments that would plague him til his death.) From 1846-54 Flaubert was immersed in an intense, and much talked about, love affair with Louise Colette, and found himself spending considerable time in Paris, which he disliked, though while there he made significant acquaintances, with Victor Hugo, Daudet, Turgenev, and the Goncourt brothers. During the same period he took off time for an extensive trip—with his friend Maxime du Camp—to Greece, Egypt, and Istanbul, sites from which he took profuse mental and correspondence notes on every kind of local color—including, unfortunately prostitutes of both sexes, from whom he acquired the venereal diseases, which in the days before antibiotics persisted for a lifetime. During these years Flaubert was already actively writing, as he had been since childhood, and in 1856 came out with his first significant, and probably greatest novel, *Madame Bovary*, which penetrates the bitter and ultimately tragic life of provincial romance. Two years later Flaubert published a daring novel (*Salambo*) of ancient Carthage, for which he prepared by a trip to Tunisia, and the site of the ancient Empire which stood up so boldly to Rome. In 1869 Flaubert published a long worked on self-study, in which he investigated both the roots of the Romantic temper, and the way they exfoliated in his own life; it was called *L'Education sentimentale*. His later years were afflicted with the maladies mentioned above—epilepsy, neurasthenia, venereal disease—aggravated, perhaps, by the labor of writing, to which he relentlessly drove himself. He died suddenly of a stroke of apoplexy.

Theories and Methods of his writing. By temperament Flaubert was a Romantic. He loathed everything that was bourgeois and ordinary, and he loved the violent, the unusual, and the colorful. Furthermore, his literary tastes preferred Chateaubriand, Hugo, and Gautier; he thought Balzac second rate, because of his careless style. (Flaubert himself would occasionally spend up to a week in the revision of a single page of prose.) He was a proponent of the theory of the 'mot juste,' the proper word, and claimed that in every instance there was just one word which precisely suited a writer's meaning. Consequently he was probably the most painstaking and self-critical novelist the world has known.

Reading

Primary source reading

Madame Bovary, tr. Davis, L., 2011.

Secondary source reading

Brown, Frederick, *Flaubert: A Biography*, 2006.

Further reading

Barnes, Julian, *Flaubert's Parrot*, 1984.

Original language reading

Hennequin, E., *Quelques écrivains français*, 2004.

Suggested paper topics

Discuss the use Flaubert made of the medical experiences to which he was exposed in his youth, and, by observation, throughout his life. What is the role of the doctor's profession in *Madame Bovary*, and what is Flaubert's attitude toward it?

Flaubert was famous for his meticulous attention to style, and would sometimes spend a week writing and rewriting a page. Can you see the effects of this procedure in a text of his? Go for examples!

Excerpt

<http://theinkbrain.wordpress.com/2011/12/31/madame-bovary-gustave-flaubert-an-excerpt/>

She gave up playing the piano. Why practice? Who would ever hear her? Since she would never play for an audience, in a short-sleeved velvet dress, on an Erard piano, skimming over the ivory keys with the lightest of fingers, never feel a murmur of ecstasy rising about her, what was the point of practicing any more? She left her sketch books and tapestry in the cupboard. What was the use? What was the use? Sewing made her nervous.

"I've read everything," she said to herself.

So she sat there idly, holding the tongs in the fire until they turned red, or watching the rain fall.

How sad she felt on Sundays, when the church bell sounded for vespers! She stood in a kind of expectant daze, listening as each broken note rang out again, and again. A cat was stalking about the rooftops, arching its back in the last pale rays of sunshine. The wind blew trails of dust along the highroad. In the distance, a dog howled now and then, and the bell kept up its tolling, each monotonous note dying out over the countryside.

Meanwhile, people had begun to walk home from church.