Heroines, villains or victims: how should we judge the female protagonists in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Fontane’s *Effi Briest* (1896)?

Extended Project Qualification

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Introducing the Books:

Emma Bovary is the young daughter of a farmer who marries a medical health officer. Bored with her role as a wife and her life with her husband, Charles, she has two affairs and spends beyond her means, entailing huge debts. Bankrupt, Emma commits suicide by taking arsenic, leaving her heartbroken husband and daughter with nothing. Her husband dies shortly after her.

Effi Briest is a seventeen year old aristocrat who marries an older man, Baron von Instetten. Unhappy with life in the small town of Kessin, she is seduced by Major Crampas. Seven years later, her husband discovers the affair and Effi is separated from her family and society as a result. Instetten challenges Crampas to a duel and kills him. Effi is finally accepted back by her parents and dies at home of a nervous disorder.
Abstract:

This project focuses on how we should consider Flaubert’s character Emma Bovary and Fontane’s Effi Briest from the point of view of 21st century readers. The Realist style of the novels means that there is an ambiguity in terms of the presentation of the authors’ view of whether their protagonists are heroines, villains or victims, so this is the question that I have tried to answer through my research. There is complexity in ‘judging’ the novels due to changes in society and the fact that no one can ever truly know the authors’ intention. Literature is subjective by nature and so there is no ‘right’ way to view the characters, but I have explored the possible ways in which they could be viewed. In order to explore the novels fully, I concentrated my research on the position of women at the time of publication; the possible views of the authors; the social position of the women; the Realist style and use of the impersonal author; and modern film interpretations. Combining the information I found with my own interpretation of the books, I was able to come to the conclusion that while Effi Briest is very much the victim of her society, Emma Bovary has qualities of both a victim and a villain. I suggest that, despite being the eponymous characters of the novels, neither protagonist comes across as the heroine of her own story.
**Introduction:**

Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Fontane’s *Effi Briest* have often been compared: they are both 19th century novels written by men and exploring the themes of adultery and unhappy marriage. On reading these books, however, the aspect that struck me most was the presentation of the female protagonists themselves. Fontane and Flaubert wrote in a ‘detached’ way, without overtly passing judgement on their characters’ behaviour, but rather describing events in detail so as to let the reader make their own judgements. An author can never be completely objective, however, as he chooses what to include and leave out, but there is a difference between subjectivity and intrusiveness and this is key to understanding *Madame Bovary* and *Effi Briest*: while Fontane and Flaubert control the plot and presentation of characters through omniscient narrators, they refrain from intruding on the text and expressing their personal views as much as possible.

This led me to the question how the authors themselves might have wanted their characters to be viewed and so my aim was to investigate possible interpretations. In the light of the emancipation of women and the feminist movement, the 21st century readers will almost certainly have a different impression of Emma Bovary and Effi Briest after the development of feminism and emancipation of women, while at the time of publication these books, *Madame Bovary* in particular, were a scandal. Flaubert was put on trial as the authorities were unsure whether *Madame Bovary* was a corrupting, immoral book or a moral, cautionary tale. Such was the ambiguity of the book that the court could not decide what the overall message was and what judgement, if any, Flaubert had made. Emma Bovary and Effi Briest both die young at the end of the novels as a result of their actions (Emma’s suicide and Effi’s nervous disorder), which suggests that there must be a purpose to the books, that they are moral tales. The exploration of whether the eponymous characters are heroines, villains or victims is important because the reader needs to be able to understand the reason for the telling of the story in order to fully appreciate the text itself.

Of the critics I have read, none of them explicitly deal with the idea of how the protagonists are categorised; they explore aspects but do not give an overview. This project thus fits into the body of research as it explores specifically the presentation of the women rather than a more general exploration of the novels as a whole. The fact that this project combines two texts in this way also means that it is taking the academic research in a new direction.

My aim has therefore been to research and then come to a conclusion as to whether these protagonists are heroines trying to forge a way for themselves, villains motivated by selfishness, or simply victims of contemporary society.
These labels carry with them strong connotations and the Oxford Dictionary\textsuperscript{1} defines them as follows:

**Heroine:**
- ‘a woman admired for her courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities’
- ‘the chief female character in a book, play or film, who is typically identified with good qualities and with whom the reader is expected to sympathise’

**Villain:**
- ‘a person guilty or capable of a crime or wickedness’
- ‘the person or thing responsible for specified problems, harm or damage’
- ‘a character whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot’

**Victim:**
- ‘a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident or other event’
- ‘a person who is tricked or duped’
- ‘a person who has come to feel hopeless and passive in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment’.

These definitions, while on their own limiting, are my starting point for considering the female protagonists. Looking at these definitions, however, some of them clearly do not suit Emma Bovary and Effi Briest. Neither character is admired for heroic qualities, nor are they evil or injured by a crime or accident. Are they simply women trapped within their time, unable to break free from their restraining traditional roles? Do their actions cause harm to those around them? Are they casualties of the mores of their age? Do they have redeeming qualities that mean the reader could sympathise with them? Which is the dominant classification: heroine, villain or victim?

\textsuperscript{1} Oxford Dictionary of English. (2005) 2nd ed.
Context

An understanding of the background to the novels is key to an in-depth study. Over the course of my reading, certain themes emerged which shaped my view of the texts and provided a useful structure for my research. In analysing these themes I tried to maintain a close focus on the aim of my project which was to further my understanding of the characters as heroines, villains and victims. I was then able to synthesise my ideas in my discussion of these three categories with closer reference to the texts themselves.

A Literary Trend
Fontane’s and Flaubert’s masterpieces were part of a 19th century trend in books about adulterous women. Maria R. Rippon\(^2\) points out that Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), is the first of a series of 19th century novels about adulteresses; Fontane’s novel (1896) is one of the last of the set. All but one of the authors surveyed by Rippon are men\(^2\). I found Rippon’s comments useful because they provided a context for my own study of Fontane’s and Flaubert’s works, showing that they were not the only writers to explore this previously taboo theme. Rippon uses the theme of adultery to examine the hypocrisy of 19th century society and adultery is shown to be neither an escape nor liberation for women.

A Woman’s Position
The social position of Effi Briest and Emma Bovary ultimately affects how we are to consider them. While Emma comes from the ‘middle class’ Bourgeoisie, Effi Briest is from the Prussian upper class, and their actions can be viewed respectively according to dominant social codes. Thomas Brand\(^3\) emphasises the contemporary focus on honour, seeing Effi as a victim, brought up to accept marriage as her only way of fulfilling her ambition and status. Rippon comments that marriage was an escape from a dull and stifling home environment for women like Emma. Porter and Gray\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Rippon, Maria R. (2002) *Judgment and Justification in the Nineteenth-Century Novel of Adultery*. Rippon is a language professor at the Military College of South Carolina. Her work provides an overview of the trend rather than a detailed analysis of the *Madame Bovary* and *Effi Briest*. The authors were: Queiros from Portugal, Tolstoy from Russia, Clarin from Spain, Fontane and Flaubert, and the American authoress, Katherine Chopin (*The Awakening*,1899).

\(^3\) Brand, Thomas (2003) *Effi Briest* (*Königs Erläuterungen*). A German study guide providing a detailed analysis of *Effi Briest* which I read in order to deepen my understanding of the culture of 19th century Prussia. Brand is a teacher of German studies and produced this guide to aid students in their study of the novel. This guide is therefore reliable as it is for mainstream educational use.

\(^4\) Porter, L.M. and Gray, E.F. (2002) *Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary*: a reference guide. An all-encompassing guide to Flaubert’s novel providing historical context and an analysis of Flaubert’s style. I have come across many analyses of Flaubert by Porter, which shows that he is an expert in this field and therefore makes this a reliable source. All of his work which I have read has proven to be very clear and apposite.
also note how limited and frustrating the options for women were, comparing men’s options of a profession, the church or the military to women’s alternatives of marriage, religious life, teaching or prostitution. Thus Fontane’s and Flaubert’s protagonists could both be seen as victims: Effi because she has to fulfil the social requirements of her status and Emma because of her restricted choice. Heath\(^5\) suggests that Flaubert explores the ambivalent role of women both as ‘ideologically central’ and ‘socially marginal’ in a world controlled by men. Porter and Gray also make the point that French men could freely seek physical/emotional satisfaction outside of marriage without being judged harshly by society; thus Emma could be seen as a victim of the double standards of the day. The question this brings forward is whether the authors in their study of Emma and Effi were judging the women or the society in which they lived. The fact that the men made the rules, exploited the women and then judged them for their actions makes it seem that the women are doomed from the start, trapped within a man’s world. Both Emma and Effi are persuaded into adultery by Rodolphe and Crampas respectively, making them victims of the men in their society.

**Worlds apart: the Aristocracy and the Bourgeoisie**

The social milieu and society’s expectations play an important role in providing the context in which the women are judged.

The full title of Flaubert’s novel was *Madame Bovary Mœurs de Province* (‘provincial manners’), suggesting a focus on the obscurity of provincial life. Indeed, Flaubert himself described it as ‘un livre sur rien’ (‘a book about nothing’). It is in this setting that Emma Bovary with her delusions of grandeur is stifled by ‘petit bourgeois’ society. Malcolm Bowie\(^6\) discusses Flaubert’s ‘war on stupidity’, arguing that in *Madame Bovary* derisory human goals and dehumanizing social arrangements are exposed to criticism. It is unclear whether Flaubert is judging Emma or bourgeois society, or even both, so the ambiguity as to whether Emma is a villain or a victim remains.

Effi, on the other hand, is a member of the Prussian aristocracy, in which status and background are all-important factors. Helen Chambers\(^7\) points out that ‘blue

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\(^5\) Heath, S. (1992) *Madame Bovary*. Heath is professor of French and English Literature and Culture at Cambridge University. His book considers *Madame Bovary* in the context of post romantic, commercial-industrial democratic society. His comments on Flaubert’s ‘impersonal’ style and attitude to bourgeois culture were most useful.

\(^6\) Kay, S., Cave, T. and Bowie, M. (2003) *A Short History of French Literature*. This presented Flaubert’s work within the context of French literature as a whole, as well as giving a more focussed view of Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*.

\(^7\) Chambers, H. (1995) *Effi Briest* (Introduction). Helen Chambers is Emerita Professor of German at the University of Saint Andrews and has a particular interest in Theodor Fontane. Her comments provided important contextual references and analysis of the author’s attitudes and writing style. Christian Grawe is quoted and translated by Chambers.
blood’ rather than money is Instetten’s reason for marrying Effi, who is brought up ‘conditioned by the expectations of her social sphere’, never thinking to object to a marriage of convenience. Effi’s status gives her a more elevated stance as a heroine: she has further to fall and more to lose than middle class Emma. Christian Grawe\(^7\) states that ‘Prussianness thus represented to Fontane’s contemporaries a mixture of...order, ambition and obedience, the Kantian ethic of doing one’s duty and the Hegelian apotheosis of the state - a combination which Fontane regarded highly critically and to which he attributes the essential responsibility for Effi’s destruction’. Thus Effi’s story is not simply one of adultery, but has political undertones, showing Fontane’s view of the transition from the empire and generational conflict between the old and the new.

**The Authors’ View**

The authors’ views are masked by the purposeful ambiguity of their ‘Realist’ style of writing, thus obscuring the view of their protagonists as heroines, villains or victims. Although Flaubert had relationships with a number of women (Porter and Gray, 2002) he never married. Indeed, a bourgeois wife was not his original subject choice, but was suggested to him by friends to widen his readership (Heath, 1992), and yet his creation is authentic and convincing. Mary Orr\(^8\) suggests that Flaubert was shocked when, during the book’s trial, the novel was deemed immoral. Flaubert had thought it highly moral in view of Emma’s fate. Orr argues that Emma is punished because she envisages an easy death, rather than painful reality; Charles’ punishment is to die penniless for indulging his wife’s imagination. According to Maurice Nadeau\(^9\), contemporary moralists considered Emma’s suicide insufficient punishment: ‘il y manque la sanction de la société’ (‘society’s sanction is missing’), seeing her as a villain who had committed a punishable crime.

Flaubert famously said: ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi!’ (Heath, 1992) Heath asserts that Flaubert sees his own flaws in Emma, that they have a ‘common ground of reverie and resistance’. Flaubert also said: ‘Ma pauvre Bovary souffre et pleure dans vingt villages de France!’ (‘My poor Bovary is suffering and crying in twenty French villages’), hinting at sympathy for ‘poor’ Emma, whose story is ordinary. Thus

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Flaubert views Emma with a mixture of condemnation and pity, but not as a heroine. Fontane makes a similar comment when he says that Effi Briest is ‘a story of adultery no different from a hundred others’ in a letter to Friedrich Spielhagen in 1896 (Chambers). The fact that both authors view their protagonists’ stories as commonplace downgrades the heroism as the label heroine suggests something out of the ordinary and special.

Both authors’ works were based on true stories. Flaubert’s model was a widowed ‘public health officer’ who marries a farm girl who has two affairs and overspends before committing suicide. Fontane based his novel on Elisabeth von Ardenne, an aristocrat whose lover is killed by her husband in a duel (Brand, 2003). Fontane adjusted the story by increasing the age gap between husband and wife from five to twenty one years, which Chambers suggests places Effi and Instetten in different generations, showing how the older, outdated values stifle the young in changing times, at the end of the Prussian empire. Chambers highlights the couple’s incompatibility, in a relationship where ‘the inexperienced child wife is manipulated by her knowledgeable husband’. This generational conflict and Effi’s punishment by society perhaps hint at Fontane’s view of her as the victim of her age.

**Realism: Free Indirect Discourse and Direct Speech**

Fontane and Flaubert maintain a detached authorial voice, not overtly judging their characters. Flaubert favours Free Indirect Speech, whereby the focus of characters’ thoughts achieves a sense of ambiguity. Porter\(^\text{10}\) describes it as the ‘phantom presence of the implied author or narrator beside the character’; this narrative method forces the reader to pay close attention to ascertain whose thoughts are expressed. Thus the characters are given a kind of autonomy, creating the illusion of a more realistic text and a direct connection with the reader. Flaubert creates a ‘fictional realism’, making his Realist novel interesting by ascribing ‘unreasonable ambitions and disastrous choices’ (Porter and Gray, 2002) to Emma, but this in turn prevents Emma from being heroic. In *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature*\(^\text{11}\), Gokhale discusses the Realist trend to which Fontane subscribed, the Gesellschaftsroman (‘society novel’), which attempts ‘to demonstrate how social and historical incidents are correlated and how individual fates are tied to political, economic, or social conditions’. Effi’s fate becomes part of an indirect social critique depicting a ‘disillusioned, anti-bourgeois attitude’ rather than an exploration of her individual actions.

\(^{10}\) Unwin, T. (ed.) (2004) *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*. This book contains essays written by many experts on Flaubert, such as L.M. Porter and Mary Orr, which is useful because it provides an overview of Flaubert’s life and works from the point of view of several leading critics, rather than just showing one person’s view of the book.

\(^{11}\) *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature*. A comprehensive overview of German literature seen from a feminist perspective, which is a particularly interesting view of books written in a pre-feminist era.
Heath discusses impersonality in *Madame Bovary*, quoting Flaubert: ‘l’auteur, dans son oeuvre, doit être comme Dieu dans l’univers, présent partout, et visible nulle part’ (‘An author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere’). So it is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether Emma is a heroine, villain or victim. Fontane, on the other hand, favoured direct speech and character behaviour to present the ‘moral and psychological situation’ (Roy Pascal\(^\text{12}\), 1956) and his characters voice their own ideas. In Pascal’s view, Fontane’s novels are essentially presentations of moral dilemmas, leaving the reader with no clear resolution: the reader is ‘aware of the complexity of the issues rather than persuaded of right and wrong’. Fontane’s final judgement of his protagonist is ambiguous: Effi judges herself very harshly in her final speech, yet her parents end the book questioning their own responsibility and guilt for her fate. Indeed, Fontane commented on the ‘intrusive author’ (Pascal, 1956): ‘The intervention of the author is almost always harmful, or at least superfluous... [the author] must refrain from judging, preaching, from being clever and wise’, so the purpose of the novel is not overtly didactic. Nevertheless, it is still a Bildungsroman (‘educational novel’) and so Fontane guides the reader towards his view, despite his aim to remain unobtrusive. Thus it would seem that the ambiguity surrounding the judgement of Emma and Effi is purposeful on the part of both Flaubert and Fontane who favour narrative ‘detachment’ to explore life in a ‘Realist’ form, explaining why both stories are based on true occurrences.

**Irony and Fate**

The authors’ use of irony and fate is significant when considering the portrayal of Emma and Effi. Alan Raitt\(^\text{13}\) highlights Flaubert’s irony, suggesting that not only was his target the petty-mindedness of the Bourgeoisie, but also the reader himself who is duped by the novel’s ambivalence. Lyrical and emotive passages are undercut by references to prosaic reality and Emma’s daughter’s fate underlines the failure of her own ambitions. Peter Harness\(^\text{14}\) emphasises Emma’s longing for a son, because ‘un homme, au moins, est libre’ (‘a man, at least, is free’). Heath proposes that Emma hopes to live vicariously through her son just like Madame Bovary senior, who influences Charles. This wish is denied her, as is any heroic status within society

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\(^{12}\) Pascal, Roy. (1956) *The German Novel: Studies*. Pascal was professor of German, University of Birmingham (1939-1969). This work contains a study of Fontane as a writer as well as a more in depth study of *Effi Briest*. It offered great insight into Fontane’s use of realism.

\(^{13}\) Raitt, A. (2002) *The Originality of Madame Bovary*. Alan Raitt was an Oxford professor, making his work reliable and well researched. I found his comments on Flaubert’s use of irony and its importance particularly useful in my study.

\(^{14}\) Harness, Peter. (2003) *Madame Bovary Afterword*. Harness is a playwright and Oxford English graduate. His comments offered a clear and concise overview of *Madame Bovary*. 

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because of her gender. Harness sees Emma alone in a man’s world, powerless and vulnerable. Charles says her death is ‘la faute de la fatalité’ (‘the fault of fatality’), suggesting her fall was destined. Heraclitus\textsuperscript{15}, the Greek philosopher, declared ‘man’s character is his fate’, which Emma illustrates in succumbing to her fate due to her character flaws.

Porter and Gray stress the irony of the memorial constructed for Emma as it does not reflect her revolt against the ordinary. ‘sta viator’ (‘pause, traveller, to pay respects’) would normally be followed by ‘for you are treading on the ashes of a hero’, but instead of hero, ‘amabilem coniugem calcas’ (‘you are treading on a loveable wife’) is inscribed. Ironically, Emma has failed to escape Yonville and is remembered simply as a wife, the role in which she was so unhappy, increasing her status as victim.

The books’ titles are significant: Emma is not ‘Emma Rouault’ or ‘Emma Bovary’, but ‘Madame Bovary’, a title which removes her individuality. In fact, as pointed out by A.S. Byatt\textsuperscript{16}, Emma is the third Madame Bovary in the book, following in the wake of Charles’ mother and his first wife. In calling the book Madame Bovary, Flaubert makes a direct comparison between Emma and her predecessors and shows her inability to fulfil her role. By contrast, Effi is not ‘Effi von Instetten’, but ‘Effi Briest’, showing that she remains true to herself and is more heroic than Emma.

Effi Briest is remembered on her grave under her own name, according to her final request as she ‘[hat] dem andern keine Ehre gemacht’ (‘did not do the other one much honour’. She has maintained her own identity to the end, laid to rest in the garden of her youth where she was so happy, which is ‘an assertion of a triumph of a kind’ (Chambers, 1995), giving her somewhat pitiful death a hint of heroism.

While irony is a fairly dominant feature of Madame Bovary, it does not play such a great role in Effi Briest, except in the final pages when Effi’s parents question their own responsibility for her fate, conveying the idea that Effi is a victim.


Considering the Main Protagonists

Our attitude to a heroine is very different from how we feel about a villain or victim; the way we consider the main characters in a novel significantly influences how we view the books as a whole.

Heroine:

In my view neither protagonist is heroic; they are not ‘admired for their courage’ or ‘outstanding achievements’. Indeed, if they were to be considered heroines, the focus of the books would change. If Emma were clearly a heroine, Flaubert’s work would not have been acquitted in the morality trial and Emma’s death would be heroic rather than cowardly. Likewise, Effi as a heroine would be making a stand against society, rather than appearing vulnerable and manipulated.

Christopher Booker\(^{17}\) suggests that Emma fits the criteria of a tragic heroine. He lays out the five stages of the tragic story\(^{17}\), demonstrating how *Madame Bovary* conforms to this basic plot sequence. Emma is the tragic heroine whose fatal flaw is an inability to accept reality. Jules de Gaultier, a French philosopher, named this flaw ‘Bovarysme’, which Porter\(^{18}\) explains as ‘the power to conceive of oneself as other than what one is’. The concept appeared in psychiatric textbooks as a disorder of the imagination involving a ‘profound disgust at reality, dissatisfaction with one’s life, flight into imagined worlds, and resulting in a neurotic – specifically hysterical – state’ (Heath, 1992). If Emma’s predicament is a medical condition, it must undermine her stance as a tragic heroine. Perhaps Flaubert’s irony extends to placing Emma within a tragic plot sequence, but without heroic characteristics. Booker’s comments offered me a unique view of Emma, but the emphasis on plot, not character, made this resource limiting.

Effi’s story does not follow the same tragic pattern, nor does she appear to have a tragic flaw. Chambers asserts that Effi’s affair does not stem from her own character, but from ‘the need for natural human warmth and freedom’; her circumstances seal her fate. Although, like a classic tragic heroine, she has further to

\(^{17}\) Booker, Christopher (2004) *The Seven Basic Plots*. I found it very interesting to see how author and journalist Booker categorises *Madame Bovary* according to the structure of the book and how he describes Emma as a tragic heroine, something which I had not seen explored in my other research. This was an important aspect to consider in making my overall judgement of the book. The five stages of the tragic plot: the Anticipation Stage, the Dream Stage, the Frustration Stage, the Nightmare Stage, and finally the Destruction or death wish Stage.

\(^{18}\) Porter, L. M. (2001) *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia*. This was useful as it offered a clear explanation of the concept of ‘Bovarysme’ and supplemented Porter’s other works.
fall than Emma, Effi still seems the victim of her passionless marriage. Alan Bance suggests Effi dies ‘with dignity, resignation, even heroism’, but it could be argued that Effi loses the will to live and wastes away and that through her assumption of guilt she is simply trying to find peace of mind. Effi’s final words are ‘Ruhe, Ruhe’ (‘peace, peace’), demonstrating her craving for a tranquil end to her life. In this way her death is not heroic, but a surrender.

Porter and Gray propose considering Emma as a romantic heroine, which is how she views herself; she has a sense of superiority and entitlement to wealth and love, but is not sufficiently lyrical and articulate for a romantic heroine. Although, ironically, Charles upholds Emma’s romantic ideas, burying her in luxury and dying of a broken heart she has no lasting heroic legacy. Indeed, the book ends not with the death of Emma or Charles, but with Homais receiving the Légion d’Honneur, a final irony as he embodies petty-mindedness and hypocrisy, not heroism.

Effi’s status as romantic heroine is undermined by her lack of romantic illusions about her lover. Crampas’ letters include no passion, but mention ‘Leichtsinn’ (‘frivolity’) and defying convention rather than true love. On hearing of Crampas’ death, Effi candidly exclaims: ‘und dann hat er den armen Kerl totgeschossen, den ich nicht einmal liebte und den ich vergessen hatte, weil ich ihn nicht liebte’ (‘and then he went and shot the poor fellow whom I didn’t even love and whom I’d forgotten because I didn’t love him’). She is practical and detached about her options: ‘ich bin schuldig und eine Schuldige kann ihr Kind nicht erziehen’ (‘I’m the guilty party and a guilty woman cannot bring up her child’). The fact that Effi is so unemotional and pragmatic prevents her from being viewed as a romantic heroine and distances the reader from her.

Emma has limited options within bourgeois society. Léon and Rodolphe illustrate the freedom Emma could have enjoyed as a man. Could Emma have benefitted from equal opportunities? Capable of tending her wounded father, unfazed by blood and able to manage her husband’s clients, she could perhaps have been a medical officer in her own right, rather than hoping vainly to channel her ambitions through a son. Emma appears a thwarted heroine because of her social position. Similarly, Effi’s only chance of fulfilment is through her husband’s successes; she admits: ‘ich habe dich eigentlich bloß aus Ehrgeiz geheiratet’ (‘it was sheer ambition that made me marry you’), revealing the frustration of a woman’s aspirations.

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Within this project the term villain identifies someone responsible for causing harm, not someone whose aim is to harm others. Emma and Effi harm their husbands and children through their actions, but most of all they harm themselves. Emma is blind to the repercussions of her actions when she commits suicide, leaving her husband bankrupt and her child ultimately an orphan. Effi is responsible for narrowing her parents’ social circle and leaving her daughter motherless.

Emma’s and Effi’s situations are very different. Emma escapes a life of rural obscurity by marrying Charles. She scorches his devotion, only recognising on her death bed what a good man he is (‘tu es bon, toi’). Charles becomes the victim despite doing ‘everything he could’ (‘j’ai fait tout ce que j’ai pu’). Emma is villainous in her abuse of Charles, searching for fulfilment through her affairs. Effi, on the other hand, has a passionless arranged marriage and lives an isolated life away from her loving parents. She sees herself as a villain, taking responsibility for the passivity and surrender to others’ wishes which are to blame for her fate. Before death, she entreats her mother to tell Instetten ‘dass er in allem recht gehandelt’ (‘that everything he did was right’). She wants to die reconciled with him and accepts her guilt. She takes the blame for the affair with Crampas: ‘alle Schuld ist bei mir’ (‘the guilt is all mine’).

The principal difference between the characters is Effi’s repentance; Emma never recognises her guilt. I feel Flaubert’s intention was to expose Emma’s villainy; in considering his story a moral tale, his purpose must be to condemn Emma’s actions and the values of a society which created her. The vanity and selfishness which lead to Emma’s ruin distance her from the reader and diminish our pity. By contrast, although Effi acts foolishly in conducting her affair, she realises the error of her ways, accepting the guilt and the punishment; it is this acceptance that prevents us from seeing her as a villain.

Fontane presents a desperately repentant Effi who takes on more than her fair share of guilt, feelings which precipitate her death. Taking Chambers’ idea that Fontane is presenting a generational conflict further, it could be argued that Effi is accepting the burden of guilt of the older generation and dies unable to withstand it. She alone is not responsible for the outcome of events: Instetten is withdrawn and aloof, Crampas is manipulative and Effi’s parents persuade her into the marriage. It is in the final scene that Effi’s parents realise that they might in part be to blame for their daughter’s fate when the mother wonders ‘ob wir nicht doch vielleicht schuld sind’ (‘whether perhaps it was our fault after all’) and ‘ob sie vielleicht zu jung war’ (‘whether she was perhaps too young’). This is a poignant final message and redirects the blame; it seems that Effi has died in vain, the victim of Prussian society, despite casting herself in the role of villain.
Victim:

Emma and Effi appear to a modern reader as victims of their time: both women have limited choice in marriage and their lives as wives and mothers; both are naive - Effi marries a man twice her age and Emma has been convent-educated.

Although Emma’s education gives her an excellent start in life (it would have been unusual for a farm girl), this experience simply serves to raise her expectations above her status. Moreover, during her time at school, she discovers the romance novel, which feeds her melodramatic nature. Emma is easily influenced by what she reads and experiences. Her visit with Charles to the ball shows how impressed she is with wealth and provides a stark contrast to her own situation; she has a feeling of entitlement and is disappointed with her life. Thus Emma is ripe for exploitation by the men who seduce her and by Lheureux, the draper, who stokes her desire for material goods, allowing her endless credit and encouraging her to take over her household finances so she can pay him. Emma’s weakness for luxury makes her succumb to temptation from Lheureux whose indifference to her bankruptcy is pitiless: ‘je m’en moque pas mal’ (‘what do I care?’). Devastated when Rodolphe and Léon both refuse to help her, she visits the notary, Monsieur Guillaumin, and just when we start to pity her plight, we see further evidence of her greed as she expresses regret not for what she has done but for what she could have had through entrusting her money with M. Guilaumin: ‘il la laissa se dévorer de rage à l’idée des sommes fantastiques’ (‘He let her consume herself with rage at the thought of the fabulous sums’). Emma recognises Guillaumin’s attempted exploitation, declaring: ‘Je suis à plaindre, mais pas à vendre!’ (‘I am to be pitied – not to be sold!’), which would lend dignity to her situation, had our view not been coloured by a rare authorial intrusion by Flaubert: ‘elle partit...sans...se douter le moins du monde de cette prostitution’ (‘she left, not in the least conscious of her prostitution’). It is her romantic sensibility rather than her moral standing which influences her here; she would give herself to Rodolphe for money, but would rather die than have a liaison with Guillaumin. This diminishes her status as a victim as she is the one in control, picking and choosing her situation as it suits her.

Effi is lonely and isolated, trapped in a loveless marriage, which makes her vulnerable to Crampas’ attention. He manipulates and seduces her, telling her Instetten is just a ‘born pedagogue’ who uses ghost stories to scare her into submission. Thus both men take advantage of Effi’s age and impressionability, making her a victim as she is unable to assert herself. The poignancy of Effi as a victim is increased by her good qualities: ‘ihre lachenden braunen Augen eine große, natürliche Klugheit und viel Lebenslust und Herzengüte verrieten’ (‘her laughing brown eyes revealed much good sense, a great zest for life and kindness of heart’). She is a beautiful child, a character worthy of the reader’s sympathy and undeserving of the fate that befalls her. Her death is presented as wasted potential, as highlighted by
the final scene in which her parents discuss whether she was simply too young. In her discussion of the Gesellschaftsroman, Gokhale writes that the ‘Realist authors shifted the focus of literature from the hero to the victim’, and to me this embodies the presentation of Effi in the novel.
Modern Film Interpretations

Having examined the context in which the books were written and the contemporary reaction to them, I was interested to explore the modern film interpretations of the novels to consider today’s view of the protagonists. While it is difficult to capture the author’s style and the richness of a novel in a film, the director can focus more on certain aspects of the characters.

While Fassbinder\(^\text{20}\) remains faithful to Fontane’s text in his 1974 production of *Effi Briest* and quotes the novel wherever possible, Huntgeburth’s\(^\text{21}\) 2009 film presents a new interpretation, showing Effi emerge emancipated and strong-willed. Huntgeburth shows a reluctant Effi forced into a loveless marriage with the aloof Instetten, despite her love for her cousin Dagobert, which increases the impression of her powerlessness and lost happiness. The contrast between the two films is striking, mainly because of the final scenes: Fassbinder’s Effi dies a repentant and resigned death, whereas Huntgeburth’s Effi embodies the freed woman, getting a job in defiance of her parents and society. This interpretation, created for a post-feminist society, shows an autonomous and heroic Effi live to see another day. Huntgeburth also chooses to include scenes between Effi and her husband, such as her wedding night, which present her as a frightened victim, trapped physically and mentally by marriage.

While Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* begins and ends with Charles, showing Emma’s entrapment within a man’s world, the 2000 BBC\(^\text{22}\) version starts with Emma’s fascination for convent life and the effect on her of her mother’s death. Emma’s naivety is shown in a sympathetic light and the death of Charles and the fate of her daughter are also omitted at the end, lessening the impression of her as a villain.


Conclusion:

My initial expectation was that the eponymous characters would be the heroines of their own stories. Now, however, my views have changed.

Part of the power of Madame Bovary and Effi Briest is the intentional ambiguity achieved by an impersonal narrator who withholds judgement, making the author’s views hardly perceptible in the texts. Emma and Effi, therefore, are to be judged by the reader, whose perception changes with each generation. This change in view is evident in Huntgeburth’s film interpretation of Fontane’s novel, in which she adapts the story to present a version of events more acceptable to a modern audience.

Emma and Effi show aspects of all three character types: heroine, villain and victim. In the case of Effi, however, the overwhelming view of her within my research is as a victim of contemporary society. She rises up to the expectation of those around her in marrying Instetten, but is stifled by her new life. The very fact that she shows remorse for her affair makes her seem more deserving of sympathy and less of a villain. Thus I see Effi as the victim of her story.

Emma reveals herself to be much more flawed and selfish. Although she suffers within the limitations of her social sphere, she does not appear to be simply a victim. Emma never expresses regret for the damage she has done and dies a cowardly death. I was intrigued by Booker’s interpretation of Emma as a tragic heroine, but I still consider her a combination of villain and victim. While contemporary readers would have viewed Emma simply as a villain, today, after the development of feminism, the hopelessness of Emma’s position is much more poignant.

The very fact that there are so many differing views on Emma and Effi as heroine, villain and victim is a testament to Flaubert’s and Fontane’s craftsmanship as Realist authors, whose characters play three distinct roles within the novels. Flaubert and Fontane have created complex, three-dimensional, believable and ultimately flawed characters who will continue to intrigue readers for generations to come. If I were to do further research in this field, I would study the trial of Madame Bovary in greater depth and read more about Fontane’s exploration of politics and the Prussian Empire as these are important aspects of the novels in terms of their wider political impact. In the future I would very much like to read Anna Karenina and see how it compares with Madame Bovary and Effi Briest.
Evaluation

While *Madame Bovary* is a book widely researched and commented upon in the English-speaking world, *Effi Briest* has not received the same level of attention. Although I have found sources relating to *Effi Briest*, the majority of my resources relate to *Madame Bovary* and French literature. However, through my research into *Madame Bovary* I found parallels with *Effi Briest*, thus my comments within this project are partly a result of research and partly of applied knowledge gained from my study of *Madame Bovary*.

I feel that the research content within this project is valid and reliable as most of the sources I have used are books written by respected critics who are experts in their field and whose work has been reviewed for publication. I could not find such reliable internet sources and, as it is often difficult to ascertain who has published articles on certain websites, I felt it was safer to keep to trustworthy publications.

None of my resources look exclusively at my chosen topic, but include general analysis of the novels with reference to Realist style. This meant that my project title worked as I could combine all aspects of my research without relying too heavily on one source; it also gave me an argument structure in considering whether the characters were essentially heroines, villains or victims. This project made me realise how subjective the study of literature is. My conclusion cannot be definitive, but I have expressed my opinion and provided evidence for it. My studies have helped me understand the extent of the books’ ambiguity and the impact this has on the interpretation of them; their subtlety is something I have learned to appreciate over time.

I have enjoyed deepening my knowledge of Flaubert’s and Fontane’s works and look forward to further study of them at university. Although ideally I would have started reading earlier and processed my ideas more fully to avoid extensive editing, I think I have benefitted from learning to use referencing and citation, as well as organising my time effectively, and I feel more prepared for degree level work. Through doing this project I have also been able to develop my presentation skills and found it very satisfying to be able to present my ideas to other people.

Over the course of the project, one of my main problems I faced was the fact that there were so many sources of contradictory information and advice about the EPQ qualification that by the time I got to the end I was not sure whose criteria I was fulfilling. For example, there has been some contradiction as to what constitutes an argument. In my view, the structure of my project provides three separate lines of reasoning and alternative interpretations which I explored before coming to a conclusion at the end. An argument is a ‘set of reasons given in support of an idea’ (Oxford dictionary) and this is what I feel I have presented in my project.

Total words: 7,110
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