

EMMA BOVARY'S DEATH: A CONTROVERSIAL CASE OF FEMALE SUICIDE

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***Abstract:** The present paper examines the death of the protagonist, Emma Bovary, in Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, framing it as a complex and controversial representation of female suicide. The analysis explores how Flaubert's depiction of Emma's death can be seen as a response to the social, psychological, and cultural constraints imposed on women in 19th-century French society. By focusing on Emma's dissatisfaction with her life, the article discusses themes of entrapment, desire, and disillusionment as central to her final act of taking her own life. Emma's suicide serves both as a critique of romantic idealism and as a commentary on the limited agency afforded to women of her time. The article considers the ethical and literary implications of depicting female despair and suicide, and it evaluates Emma Bovary's death as a case study of the broader struggles faced by women within restrictive social norms.*

***Keywords:** death, suicide, literature, female characters, women*

1. Introduction

The character is not merely a representation of an image but embodies various facets of human nature, encompassing numerous traits. Some suicidal female literary portrayals have left a deep mark on collective consciousness, either through the methods they chose for ending their lives, the motivations behind their decisions, or the impact of their extreme gesture on contemporary society. Suicidal figures acquire a distinct aura through the tragic hue of their existence, displaying an exceptional capacity to stir emotions. These characters stand out, designed to shock, intrigue, fascinate, enrage, or sadden. Their existential journey is driven by internal motivations, unique to each consciousness, and what sets these characters apart is their individual capacity to handle certain situations, positioning them as autonomous, unique figures or as representatives of specific typologies.

The 19th century reconstructed the character primarily in relation to social interactions, rather than extensive introspection. The character is built in relation to the society in which it lives, becoming consubstantial with it: "the individual detaches from reality, incorporating it in a resumptive manner"^{1 2}. The character becomes a transposition of the social nature integrated into its being, easily categorized within a typological gallery. Based on the concept of mimetic representation of reality, the novel must render life itself, without attempting to dilute the truth. Giving in to instincts, characters may choose to rebel against rigid, predetermined norms, thereby sealing their fate decisively. Other times, they are merely victims of heredity, inclined toward various vices or obsessions.

Suicidal behaviour involves a series of actions rooted in an emotional imbalance, often due to external factors. Researchers assert that suicide arises from

¹ All quotations in the present paper are rendered in our own translation.

² Tudor Olteanu, *Morfologia romanului european în secolul al XIX-lea*, București, Editura Univers, 1979, p. 295.

both psychological and social reasons; those who end their lives do so in response to direct or indirect triggers – an unexpected event, an apparently inescapable situation, etc. – with which they have failed to establish a shared basis for communication. Consequently, a conflict that should be outwardly expressed takes place within the self, thereby disrupting the existential flow and leading to self-destruction.

Each individual is genetically endowed with a degree of aggression and a certain capacity to cope with existence; aggression, when it cannot be directed externally, is turned inward, culminating in self-destruction. Hence, suicidal tendencies are not solely attributed to individual causes but also to social, collective factors. According to sociologist Émile Durkheim, the true determinant of self-destruction is social in nature, given that its implications are rooted in contexts involving social relationships defined by norms, values, and moral or religious rigors, making voluntary death primarily a social issue, as the individual nullifies themselves as part of society, withdrawing from collective involvement³.

2. Emma Bovary – one of the suicide women of the 19th century

In world literature, female self-destruction often represents a rebellion against a seemingly emancipated society, with attitudes towards this radical act remaining essentially eclectic. Most often, female suicide is attributed to social causes, as many female figures fail to find their bearings in a repressive society that confines their vitality to the domestic sphere, thus generating numerous conflicts both socially and within their inner lives. "Erotic adventures are among the most accessible means for appeasing a deep thirst for life"⁴ and the characters tend "to exploit every situation to the maximum"⁵. For women whose freedoms are entirely restricted, the thought of suicide infiltrates their minds, as they are willing to renounce their status as living beings, basing this decision on an irreversible dissonance with life.

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* tells the story of a woman profoundly dissatisfied with her entire existence, primarily due to the social inequalities faced by women in the 19th century. Boredom and lack of control over her life represent a pattern that can also be found in the portrayal of other female protagonists of the time. The despair and desolation of these heroines often lead them to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, seeking solace outside of marital life.

Beyond illustrating feminine fate, the novel also provides an arithmetic of social conditions of the time. The narrative unfolds between 1830 and 1840 in northern France. Like Anna Karenina or Edna Pontellier, Emma Bovary's life revolves around marriage to a man whose aspirations are in stark contrast to hers. The relationship between the spouses exists only in appearance, as their differing interpretations of the meanings of existence and love ultimately prove tragic: "Emma easily convinced herself that Charles's passion no longer held anything remarkable. His expressions of love followed a schedule; he kissed her at fixed times. It was a

³ Emile Durkheim, *Sinuciderea. Studiu de sociologie*, traducere de Mariana Tabacu, Prahova, Editura Antet XX Press, 2005, p. 10.

⁴ Karl Leonhard, *Personalități accentuate în viață și în literatură*, traducere din limba germană de Dr. Virgil Sorin și Mariana Zoltan, București, Editura Enciclopedică Română, 1972, p. 199.

⁵ Denis de Rougemont, *Iubirea și Occidentul*, traducere și note de Ioana Feodorov, București, Editura Univers, 2000, p. 346.

habit like any other and was as predictable as dessert after a monotonous meal”⁶ 7. Flaubert constructs Emma as possessing an intense thirst for experiences that will guide her entire existence. Unable to detach herself from this hunger for life, Emma views each experience through a sentimental lens. Thus, the novel illustrates the feminine dissatisfaction with what is, in the collective mindset of the time, a good marriage to a respectable man.

The novel begins with the description of Charles Bovary’s life, characterized by Flaubert as a mediocre student. Charles is a passive man, consistently dominated by the women in his life, starting with his mother and his first wife, culminating with Emma Rouault, the protagonist and his second wife: “One could learn nothing from him; he knew nothing, desired nothing”⁸. After his first wife dies, Charles asks Emma’s father for her hand in marriage. Upon marrying, the protagonist’s unhappiness immediately begins to take shape, initially as dissatisfaction caused by the absence of any sort of emotion: “She tried, in order to mortify herself, to go an entire day without eating. She searched her mind for a desire to fulfil. When she went to confession, she invented little sins just to spend as much time as possible on her knees there [...]”⁹; “Accustomed to tranquil things, she was drawn, instead, to turbulent ones”¹⁰; “Why did I marry, oh Lord?”¹¹.

Emma becomes an avid reader of highly romantic stories, which will significantly shape her unrealistic expectations of her own condition: “Before marriage, she believed she loved; but since the happiness that should have resulted from this love did not come, it meant she had been mistaken, she thought. And Emma tried to understand exactly what people meant in life by the words happiness, passion, or the thrill of the senses, which had seemed so beautiful in books”¹². Influenced by her romantic readings, she develops unrealistic stereotypes and clichés of absolute love, which trigger deep emotions that she becomes dependent on. In the absence of real experiences that might awaken various sensations, Emma forces herself either to remember past moments that stirred her emotions or to imagine romantic stories, emulating those she read, envisioning herself as living them.

The protagonist’s unrealistic ideals are further intensified after she and Charles attend a ball at Vaubyessard, where Emma catches a glimpse of what she considers to be a life free of mediocrity: “Champagne was served on ice. Emma shivered all over as she felt the coldness in her mouth. She had never seen pomegranates or tasted pineapple. Even the sugar seemed whiter and finer than anywhere else”¹³. Yet, once the ball ends and she returns to her conjugal life, she feels empty and yearns for similar experiences. The ball at Vaubyessard proves

⁶ All quotations from the literary text are sourced from *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, translated from French by Florica Ciodaru-Courriol, Bucharest, Art Publishing House, 2015; the translations are our own.

⁷ Gustave Flaubert, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 71.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

significant, not for integrating the couple into high society, but for solidifying in Emma's mind a conception of what life should mean for a woman: "The trip to Vaubyessard opened a chasm in her life, like those enormous cracks created by storms in a single night, in mountains"¹⁴. Memories of the ball and the man with whom she danced flood her mind: "The music from the ball still rang in her ears, and she made an effort to stay awake to prolong the illusion of that life of luxury"¹⁵; "The memory of the ball thus became a real occupation for Emma"¹⁶; "The memory of the Viscount kept coming back during her reading. She made connections between him and the invented characters"¹⁷. Charles begins to irritate her more and more, and she grows increasingly dissatisfied with her marriage. She gives up hobbies she once found interesting and constantly complains about her lack of activity: "Only she had nothing happening to her—so God willed it! The future was a dark hallway with the door at the end shut. She gave up music. Why play? Who would listen? [...] And so she sat, warming the poker in the fire or watching the rain fall"¹⁸.

Due to Emma's "precarious health," Charles decides to move his medical practice to another town, believing this change will improve her condition. They relocate to Yonville, where Emma learns she is pregnant and eventually gives birth to a daughter, whom she names Berthe. However, motherhood disappoints her as she had hoped for a son through whom she could vicariously access the male-dominated world and public life: "The idea of having a son, a male, was like a hope of revenge over all her past failures. A man is, at least, free; he can travel through countries and passions, surpass obstacles, bite into the most unsuspected pleasures. But a woman is always hindered from doing so. Inert and inflexible, a woman is thwarted by her physical frailties and subject to laws at once"¹⁹. Lacking maternal instinct, she gives little Berthe to a wet nurse who lives in a filthy house on the outskirts of town. Emma's choice to have her daughter raised in such a squalid environment demonstrates her total lack of affection for her own child. When the little girl seeks her mother's attention, Emma angrily shoves her with her elbow, causing Berthe to fall and cut her cheek. In front of Charles, Emma claims that Berthe fell accidentally while playing. This incident and Emma's thoughts regarding her child illustrate her deep alienation, as she views her daughter with disdain, as a foreign object: "How strange, thought Emma, how ugly this child is!"²⁰.

3. Emma's narcissistic tendencies and romantic escapism

Gifted with an air of permanent dissatisfaction and influenced by the romantic novels she reads, Madame Bovary centres her existence around her lovers Léon and Rodolphe de Boulanger, convincing herself that she is living unique experiences and

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

thereby disconnecting from reality. Unhappy without a specific reason and exhausted by the mundanity of her surroundings and people, she finds no internal resources to improve her life. In the same emotional void that characterizes most love-struck heroines waiting for something to happen, she believes she falls in love with the notary's assistant, Léon Dupuis.

Léon's departure to Paris destabilizes her, throwing her into the arms of Rodolphe, with whom she becomes obsessed, constantly questioning his feelings for her. She sees Rodolphe as her means of escaping the dreary life she leads with her dull husband: "Oh, how I love you!" she would begin again. "I love you so much that I can't live without you, you know that?"²¹; "But I've been patient and suffering for four years!... Our love should be acknowledged before heaven! They torment me! I can't take it anymore! Save me!"²²; "Take me away from here! she cried. Steal me away! Oh, I beg you!"²³; "Why is my heart sad? Is it fear of the unknown..., the separation from what is familiar..., or perhaps... ? ... How weak I am, right? Forgive me!"²⁴; "You love other women, admit it."²⁵; "You never loved me! You are no better than the others!"²⁶.

4. Despair and financial ruin

Her abandonment by Rodolphe plunges her into a state of illness and despair, seeking escape through other means. In her attempt to surpass her social status by indulging in luxury, Emma accumulates debts she cannot pay, which eventually drive her to suicide, but not before announcing her suicidal intentions: "You drive me to despair!"²⁷; "Let what will be, be!"²⁸; "You don't have it!... I would have spared myself this final humiliation"²⁹; "I won't torment you for long!"³⁰. Despite multiple love affairs, Emma complicates her life with expensive purchases, which eventually lead her to a point of no return. "Her failure does not stem from weakness, but from a desire stronger than a personality with moderate willpower"³¹. Although she is aware of her weakness for luxury, Emma cannot stop buying expensive items: "She confused, in her desire, the sensuality of luxury with the joys of the heart, the elegance of habits with the tenderness of feelings"³². Throughout the novel, the protagonist accumulates numerous debts she cannot repay, and when she turns to her former lovers for help, she receives nothing from them.

She lives with the impression that she is destined for a grander life, yet, due to her status as a middle-class woman, she will never fulfil this dream: "Everything close to her, the boring provincial life, the idiotic middle class, the mediocrity of

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 248.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 387.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 388.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 368.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 375.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 388.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 395.

³¹ Leonhard, *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 198.

³² Gustave Flaubert, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 90.

existence, seemed accidental, a peculiar mishap in which she was trapped, while beyond lay the vast land of happiness and passion as far as the eye could see”³³; “She wanted to travel or return to the convent. She wanted to die and yet live in Paris”³⁴. Consequently, feelings of dissatisfaction settle in her subconscious, dominating her existence: “Will this misery never end? Will she never be rid of it? She was no less than other women who lived happily!”³⁵; “she wept with her head against the wall, envying tumultuous lives, nights at masquerade balls, daring pleasures with all the passion she imagined but did not know”³⁶. Gaultier coined the term “Bovaryism” to capture Emma’s essence, referring to her romantic illusions, her inability to find satisfaction in small things, and her maladaptive coping mechanisms, defining it as “the power granted to man to conceive of himself as other than he is”³⁷. Bovaryism represents, in fact, a chronic affective dissatisfaction within a person. Emma Bovary’s archetype has become a universal literary reference, with subsequent prototypes confirming the enduring relevance of this theme regarding human identity.

Throughout the novel, Emma engages in narcissistic actions in response to her inability to meet her own expectations for life, and her mental state progressively deteriorates, eventually leading to suicide. When she realizes the gravity of her situation – having lived a life of excess, amassing debts, and finding herself in an inescapable position – she begins to contemplate death: “Ah, death is a small matter! she thought; I will sleep, and all will be over!”³⁸.

5. The symbolism of Emma's death

The only dignified way out of her humiliating situation, which she no longer knows how to manage, seems to be self-destruction, perceiving death superficially. She believes there is no hope of future happiness for herself. She endures a series of disappointments, beginning with a mediocre marriage and culminating in the birth of her daughter. She yearns for a husband with an interesting life, feeling drawn to men who focus on themselves and live as they please, just as she wishes to do: “What exasperated her was Charles’s inability to see her suffering. His belief that he made her happy seemed like an idiotic insult to her, his conviction on this point, an ingratitude”³⁹. Disheartened by the course of her life, her mental health deteriorates, and she seeks something to give meaning to her existence: “She was paler, with palpitations [...] There were days when she spoke excessively and quickly; exaltations followed by moments of indifference when she remained silent, unmoving [...] It was a nervous condition; she needed a change of air”⁴⁰.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

³⁷ Jules De Gaultier, *Bovaryismul*, Colecția Eseuri de ieri și de azi, Iași, Editura Institutul European, 1993, p. 10.

³⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 393.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

Emma's quest for glory takes various forms, as she tries to confirm her idealized self-concept through religious fervour, romantic love, devotion to duty, and her husband's accomplishments. As each solution fails, she turns to another or escapes into memories, books, and dreams. When nothing works, and the future appears hopeless, her anger and despair lead to erratic behaviour, sometimes marked by cynicism: "she no longer hid her contempt for anything or anyone; and she began to express strange opinions, condemning what was approved and approving of perverse or immoral things: making her husband stare"⁴¹.

After her love affairs end, she returns to a depressive state. The only times Emma feels satisfaction and control are when she escapes her mediocre existence alongside men who enjoy the freedom to live the life she so desperately wants but only partially accesses, limited by marriage and motherhood. Madame Bovary's confinement to the domestic sphere is evident from the beginning of their marriage, making Emma's desire for a public life an unachievable dream. While Charles works, she remains at home: "He would return late at night, sometimes at midnight. He would ask for food, and as the servant was asleep, Emma would serve him herself"⁴². Her situation becomes more stifling when she becomes a mother, feeling shackled by the values upheld among bourgeois families. Belonging to the middle class, she is expected to follow Rousseau's restrictive model of motherhood as the ideal. Although, in Rousseau's view, motherhood is the key, not the barrier, to middle-class women's progress, Emma faces difficulties in fulfilling her maternal role.

6. The dual impulses driving Emma's life

Two complementary impulses guide the protagonist's existence: her preference for attractive and distinguished men and her desire for social interaction. Emma desires the company of such men because they offer her the public life she desperately craves. However, it is not sexual desires that push her into the public sphere but rather the banality of domestic life that leads her to extramarital affairs, which in turn bring her social exposure: "She wondered if some way, through the play of chance, she might meet another man; and she tried to imagine those unaccomplished events, that new life, that man she did not know. Surely, they could not all be like her own"⁴³. Emma's confinement to the domestic sphere, unlike aristocratic women, is the primary reason for her dissatisfaction with life: "[...] they led lives in which the heart soars, in which the senses blossom. But she led a life as cold as an attic with a north-facing window, and boredom, a silent spider, wove its web in the shadows, in every corner of her heart"⁴⁴; "The mediocrity of marriage pushed her toward costly fantasies, conjugal tenderness toward adulterous desires"⁴⁵. Thus, in her view, Rodolphe and Léon, unlike Charles, can rescue her from the misery of domestic life that has caused her unhappiness.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

In essence, Emma's adulterous affairs serve as a way to defy the restrictive lifestyle imposed by her role as a housewife in bourgeois society. On many occasions, Emma accompanies Léon and Rodolphe to high-society gatherings, where she observes aristocratic women and tries to imitate their behaviour. As long as she frequents the elite circles, her adulterous conduct is largely ignored by those around her, as sexual infidelity is tolerated within high society. In post-revolutionary France, a new woman emerged within the elite circles, one in pursuit of unrestrained pleasure, revelry, and dancing. Thus, the behaviour of free-spirited women in salons and cities stood in opposition to the morality upheld by bourgeois families. According to this view, women who led socially active, pleasure-centred lives were called "une femme-homme". Emma notices society's tolerance for these women's behaviour and finds courage in adopting the same lifestyle, forgetting that she does not truly belong to their ranks. Yet, while Emma poses as an upper-class woman, society does not fully accept her as a member of this class.

As Emma wanders through the streets of Rouen, she sees many prostitutes and begins to reflect on the freedom of these women, yet she considers herself superior to them. Despite this, by the novel's end, circumstances change, and society eventually categorizes her among the "fallen" women. When Charles learns of Emma's infidelity, he does not become angry; rather, he imagines himself as one of her lovers, especially when he sees Rodolphe. The dichotomy imposed between housewife and mistress created a significant rift between erotic love and conjugal love, as "men were discouraged from seeing their wives as sexual beings"⁴⁶. As a result, Charles begins to perceive Emma as a possible mistress only after discovering her affairs. Both Charles and Emma are, in fact, victims of bourgeois ideology. Undoubtedly, Emma's failed romantic relationships contribute to her feelings of helplessness and misery, precipitating her self-destruction. However, Madame Bovary commits suicide because she fails to find meaning in her existence.

Throughout the novel, Emma reflects on her feelings of love for Léon and Rodolphe, comparing herself to the literary characters emblematic of absolute love. Thus, by cultivating exaggerated romantic fantasies, she seeks an identity that allows her to express her sexual and social desires, which contrast with her role as a housewife. As such, her extramarital affairs not only involve her in the public sphere but also create the conditions for her to forge a new identity, one that encompasses her desires without being labelled as immoral. However, her financial ruin ultimately changes her status entirely.

When Emma accrues debts she cannot repay, she desperately tries to obtain money, willing to go to any length to secure it. Throughout the novel, she pawns several belongings to pay off her debt to Lheureux, and when she has nothing left to sell, he suggests she sell herself in exchange for money, referring to her lovers or so-called friends. When Emma meets the notary Maître Guillaumin and explains her situation, he makes advances, offering financial support in exchange for sexual favours. Indignant, she perceives this as an insult to her dignity: "You shamelessly

⁴⁶ Rachel Mesch, "Housewife or Harlot? Sex and the Married Woman in Nineteenth-Century France", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 18, No. 1, 2009, p. 68.

take advantage of my misery, sir! I am to be pitied, but not for sale!”⁴⁷. Though Emma is disgusted by Lheureux’s insinuations, she refuses to acknowledge society’s connection between herself and a “fallen” woman. However, her encounter with Binet, the tax collector, highlights this collective perception. While they speak, Madame Tuvache and Madame Caron speculate baselessly about their conversation, imagining Emma begging for money in exchange for advances, concluding that “such women should be whipped”⁴⁸. Although the content of their conversation remains undisclosed, it reflects society’s view of Madame Bovary’s new status. Her financial ruin recasts her behaviour in a different light.

Still, Emma tries to restore her previous status by visiting her lovers and emphasizing the love she felt for them. Not wishing to turn to Charles, she asks Léon for money while expressing her love, despite her feelings for him having faded. This tactic, used to manipulate her lover, suggests her moral and psychological degradation. When Léon is unable to provide the money she needs, she turns to her other lover, Rodolphe, despite having no remaining affection for him. Nonetheless, she reminds him of her past love for him: “My hands are still warm from your kisses, and here, on the carpet, is where you swore eternal love at my knees”⁴⁹. By highlighting the emotional aspect of their relationship, she reasserts her identity as Rodolphe’s mistress. However, as soon as Emma mentions her financial crisis, Rodolphe’s face pales, and he suddenly becomes distant, as her monetary request destroys the elevated love she had referenced. With the emotional aspect gone, only the sexual and financial elements of the relationship remain. As a result, Madame Bovary’s financial situation places her, even in her lover’s eyes, at the level of a prostitute.

Realizing that her lack of financial resources makes it impossible to secure a respectable position in her community, Emma is no longer the nonconformist mistress but merely a “fallen” woman, despised by high society. In a social paradigm that allows only two roles for middle-class women—housewife or fallen woman—Emma’s identification with the latter category, due to her choices, becomes inevitable. Once she comprehends her precarious position, she goes to the pharmacist’s shelf, takes the blue jar of arsenic, and chooses a slow, agonizing death: “Emma went straight to the third shelf, her memory guiding her well, took the blue jar, tore off the lid, plunged her hand into it, and began eating the white powder from her palm”⁵⁰; “Her teeth chattered, her enlarged eyes looked vaguely around [...] her moans grew louder [...] convulsions began to grip her”⁵¹; “She then began to scream terribly. She cursed the poison, at times scolding, at other times pleading with it to act faster”⁵². After her death, Charles decides that Madame Bovary should be dressed in her wedding gown, ideologically restoring her to her original role as his wife.

⁴⁷ Gustave Flaubert, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 379.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 382.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 389.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 392.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 394.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 397.

Flaubert cannot reconcile his protagonist's sexuality with her status as a mother and wife, as he fails to propose an alternative role that would allow Madame Bovary a more dignified existential solution, a fact that underscores "how one culture or another perceives gender related subjects"⁵³. She must choose between the two identities imposed upon her, and her attempts to adopt a different role by emulating the lifestyle of aristocratic women are ultimately punished harshly, as her suicide confirms the inadmissibility of constructing an alternative female identity in her society.

In the 19th century, masculinity was associated with freedom, and femininity with passivity, weakness, and purity. Therefore, Margaret Higonnet notes that 19th-century literature presents female suicide as a consequence of the deficiencies of the social system. Emma's suicide thus results from "social disintegration and victimization rather than heroic self-sacrifice"⁵⁴. However, the controversial nature of her death has generated other interpretations worth considering. Jacqueline Merriam Paskow argues that *Madame Bovary* deviates from other canonical 19th-century texts depicting female suicide, noting that Emma's motives "are not those typical of 19th-century female adultery"⁵⁵. Paskow claims that, through her romantic relationships, Emma seeks to quench her desire to find life's meaning. As she realizes she is destined for unhappiness, despair drives her to end her life. While Higonnet blames society for Emma's death, Paskow reduces her self-destruction to an unfulfilled psychological need. Jacques Rancière, in examining Emma's suicide, offers a different analytical approach. According to Rancière, the heroine's tragedy lies in her "mistake of confusing literature with life"⁵⁶. However, her death should not be viewed as impulsive but rather as a consequence of her entire way of life. Raised in a rural family, she was educated to believe that marriage is her destiny. While Emma harbours unrealistic assumptions about romantic love, she shares the provincial mentality that marriage defines life. Emma marries without fully understanding what such a union entails in contemporary French society.

7. Conclusions

Emma's suicide can be attributed conventionally to two causes: her debts and her extramarital affairs. Yet, throughout the novel, she openly flaunts her lovers, indicating a lack of concern for secrecy. Moreover, it is not her debts themselves that drive her to suicide but rather the social position they imply. For her betrayal of her socially assigned role, Emma is scorned by both men and women as a "fallen" woman. Faced with the choice between remaining a housewife or assuming the role of a fallen woman, she chooses arsenic. The narrative thus captures the moral and social convictions of the time

⁵³ Ioan Benjamin Pop, "Language and Fertility: a Non-Dogmatic Approach", în *Buletin Științific, Fascicula Filologie, seria A*, vol. XXIII, 2014, p. 303.

⁵⁴ Margaret Higonnet, "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century." *Poetics Today*, vol. 6, no. 1/2, 1985, doi:10.2307/1772124. /1985), p. 106.

⁵⁵ Jacqueline Merriam Paskow, "Rethinking Madame Bovary's Motives for Committing Suicide." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 100, no. 2, Apr. 2005, p. 234.

⁵⁶ Jacques Rancière, "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2008, p. 534.

regarding women's status, with Emma's literary portrayal representing women of her era as victims of collective consciousness.

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