

The Environment: The One Way Ticket To Suicide

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Abstract. In spite of the fact that some scholars and critics classify Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* among the masterpieces of world literature and consider them as the two most important realistic novels, I tend to believe that they are not purely realistic. In my opinion, *Madame Bovary* and *Maggie* are composed of a mixture of realism and naturalism and probably with an equal weight.

The two writers masterly portray everyday life as it really is and with great detail. They also render in these two novels, and with great skill, the ugliness and dullness of the provincial middle class life in *Madame Bovary*, and the ugliness of the lower class in *Maggie*. All this, and more is shown clearly in these two novels, but one cannot forget the major element which plays a vital role in the shaping of the form and construction of *Madame Bovary* and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; this element is the environment which in turn forms a basic element of the school of naturalism.

The paper deals with the element of environment to show how it can shape the lives and determine the destinies of the two major characters, Emma Bovary and Maggie.

Although Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are considered two of the most important realistic novels, generally speaking, one tends to believe that they are not purely realistic. In my view, these two works can also be read as a mixture of realism and naturalism and probably with equal weight. Both writers skillfully render everyday life as it actually is and with photographic details; and it is equally true that they also portray the dullness and ugliness of the provincial middle class society in *Madame Bovary*, on the one hand, and the ugliness of the lower class in *Maggie* on the other. Both Flaubert and Crane pay great attention to detail in describing the average life of a community and the various kinds of emotions and reactions of their respective characters. Throughout these novels the reader shares with the characters, their agony, despair and isolation. Moreover, the reader is also made to live with the ugliness of the real world of Emma Bovary and Maggie, and at the end one discovers with the two heroines that

no one can escape reality in spite of its ugly characteristics; for one simple reason, it is reality.

All this is true, but it should be noted that a major element: the element of environment plays a significant role in the shaping of form and structure of *Madame Bovary* and *Maggie*. This element in turn forms a basic premise of the school of naturalism.

The group of "naturalist writers" tend to stress the element of the environment as being one of the main elements which play a vital role in shaping the individual's life. Thus, much emphasis is laid on the animal nature of man and how he becomes animal-like in his brutal struggle for survival. According to this school, the term naturalism is simply

an attempt to achieve fidelity to nature by rejecting idealized portrayals of life. Naturalism may be further defined as a technique or manner of presenting an objective view of man with complete accuracy and frankness. Naturalistic writers hold that man's existence is shaped by heredity and environment, over which he has no control and about which he can exercise little if any choice. Novels and plays in this movement, emphasizing the animal nature of man, portray characters engrossed in a brutal struggle for survival. Emile Zola, founder of the French school of naturalism, held that "a novelist should dissect and analyze his subjects with dispassionate, scientific accuracy and minuteness."⁽¹⁾

In *Le Roman Experimental*, 1880, and in the preface to a new edition of his early novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, 1867, Emile Zola, "the most gifted of the group and its theoretician,"⁽²⁾ proclaimed the naturalist creed most boldly, when he declared that:

The naturalist novelist places his characters in a particular social milieu and then, like a chemist in a laboratory observes the interaction of temperament and environment which he finally 'writes up' ... Most of the novels use the temperament/environment interaction to suggest that even the most reprehensible characters are not so much innately 'bad' as victims of heredity and social conditioning⁽³⁾

This paper actually deals with and focuses on the aspect of the environment as it is portrayed in *Madame Bovary*, and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. It will be shown that the environment can actually shape the lives and determine the destinies of the two major characters, Emma and Maggie.

(1) Harray Shaw, ed. *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), p. 185.

(2) W.D. Howarth, H.M. Peyre and John Cruickshank, eds. *French Literature From 1600 to the Present* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 101.

(3) Howarth, et al., p. 101.

Madame Bovary and *Maggie* portray two women's foolishness and stupidity, their wrong attitudes toward real life and their blindness to distinguish between what is real and what is illusory. These two stories show the depression and the misery of those who are unable to face things as they really are and who prefer to live in their own dream worlds.

The characters in *Madame Bovary* are all ordinary people whom we might come across in everyday life, and as in real life most of them attract us and get our pity and sympathy, in one way or the other, especially Emma, the heroine. Flaubert treats each character as he or she really deserves to be treated. He offers no exceptions, nor does he present any miracle to change the destiny. He does not interfere in their own lives and thus, each character is on his own. But Emma stands out in complete contrast to the rest of the characters in the novel. Nothing seems to satisfy her at all. She ignores her husband and she rejects his love. For a while, she is very pleased and excited after she marries Charles; but she soon longs for something new and feels the boredom and the disillusion of her new life. Emma is born with a great love for sentimentality and romance. When her father sends her to the convent she likes the idea very much at first, because she wants to see something new there. But later, she hates the place and prefers to enjoy the beauty of the chapel. She neglects her responsibilities to her husband and to herself. At the convent she spends all her time reading romantic poetry and novels, concentrating on those which deal with secrets and gothic meetings. She imagines herself living in a romantic palace where a knight on a white horse may appear any minute to rescue her. Emma lives in her own world, a world which is characterized by sentimentality and a romantic view of life and of love.

Emma's great expectations of marriage turned out to be disappointing and unexpected; Charles Bovary was by no means the "white plumed cavalier" (*M.B.*, p. 766) of her daydreams. She thought of marriage as something beautiful if it could only fulfill her romantic dreams, and as a world which was full of love and passion. She believed that marriage was going to change her life and that it was going to be something similar to what she had read about in her books and novels. Before the wedding took place Emma was excited and happy, (she wanted to have a midnight wedding lighted with torches.) But after her marriage to Charles everything changed. She was shocked by what she discovered. To her surprise marriage was not as romantic in reality as it was in her novels and dreams, so she was very disappointed and disillusioned. Everything that Emma dreamed of came to nothing because she did not find the pleasure and the happiness she expected from marriage. In her anguish she began to criticize Charles' appearance: his fingers, his way of dressing and his common life. She hated the dull life at Tostes. Finally, she ended up by regretting her marriage as a whole. One is inclined to indicate that Emma was going to act the way she did, because there was a very big difference between her dream world and that of Charles Bovary. Her longing for romantic passion and love led her directly to adultery and ultimately to death.

Emma had her own point of view towards religion. She looked in religion only for the mystic and the unnatural elements. To her, her world of dreams was the only real world because, as she believed, it was the world of love, of passion and of excitement. Moreover, Emma rejected the life of discipline and whatever might tie her to order.

Father Bournisien, the priest at Yonville, unable to know the real needs of those who seek his spiritual guidance, failed Emma as well. Flaubert portrays him as being an ignorant and unsophisticated priest. When Emma first met Father Bournisien to explain to him her hopeless outlook on life and her real need for his help as a priest, he ignored her pleas and directed his attention elsewhere. He was rather more interested in revealing to her his own problems rather than in hearing hers. He told her that what she needed was some rest and a hot cup of tea. Thus, her disappointment in the priest marked another step that would ultimately lead to her downfall.

If Father Bournisien had understood and helped Emma overcome her problems, she could have perhaps been saved from being an easy victim to her dreams and to her own emotions. Honest and sympathetic advice might have been Emma's real safeguard.

During her illness Emma embraced religion once more. She spent more of her time either with the priest or with some religious books. She even wished to be a saint. She dreamed of angles, of purity, of peace and of love all over the world. She simply devoted herself to God, especially when she remembered death. But later on she gave up the whole idea of religion. Her sense of religion showed through in a different way; it was a sensuous way of thinking of religion. Even the kiss she gave to the crucifix, before her death, was sensuous, rather than a kiss meant to be given to God. Thus, in religion, Emma was rather interested in the sensual, the mystic, than the spiritual.

Society or the environment, may be taken as another reason behind Emma's suicide. Emma believes in love, the kind of love that is colored with passion and sympathy. She never dreams that anybody would ever reject her, especially those whom she loves most. She cannot adjust herself to the life of the middle-class people because to her such a life lacks passion, love, intelligence and above all, it lacks the most important thing which she believes in: imagination and romantic adventures. All these things, along with the miserable social conditions and the betrayal of those whom she loved and trusted lead Emma to desperation and consequently to her downfall. For these reasons, "suicide becomes a natural reaction to an unnatural reaction to an unnatural condition,"⁽⁴⁾ as Alvarez points out.

(4) A. Alvarez, ed. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 85.

Suicide, here, becomes “an act of ambition that can be committed only when one has passed beyond ambition.”⁽⁵⁾ By destroying herself, she, in a way, wants to exhibit her denial and her protest against the corrupt social conditions that surround her. At the beginning of the novel, Emma completely surrenders to a dream world. But finally she becomes full of anguish, depression and despair. She finds herself in a predicament totally different in nature from the one she had all along dreamt of: a reality she can bear no longer. She is too sensitive, too delicate and too weak to endure the burden laid upon her. She finds herself standing alone in the real world against all these circumstances surrounding her. Consequently, despair, depression, anguish and the inhumane society make her take one decision: suicide.

More than anything, Charles, Emma’s husband, is instrumental in her downfall. Like Father Bournisien, he does not possess the imagination or the instinct to notice Emma’s need for passion and romance. She is disappointed in her marriage because it is not as romantic as she thought it would be. With Charles, neither money nor physical comfort would make Emma happy. What she needs is a sort of unattainable love and romance, things which Charles cannot give her. He is not sensitive enough to his wife’s desires. He is always busy with his practice, although he fails as a doctor. Then Emma starts to hate him and she longs for a way out of this dull and infernal world. Thus, she finds herself in the world of adultery. He, unconsciously, drives her to her doom.

Lheureux, the moneylender, is also indirectly responsible for her death. He is, in fact, Emma’s main financial source. He encourages her to borrow much more money from him, and he is the one who gives her the idea of consulting the lawyer in order to have a strong control over her husband’s money. He gradually leads her to her downfall when she finds herself sinking deeply in debt. Consequently, if it were not for Lheureux, Emma could not have had enough money to spend on her unnecessary things in order to fulfill her dreams.

Maitre Guillaumin, the notary who may be considered as the meanest of all the characters, lacks sympathy, pity and mercy, and he does not possess any sense of morality or ethics. Emma goes to him to see if he could lend her some money in order to save herself and her husband’s honor. Noticing her beauty, the lawyer agrees to give her the money she needs, but under one condition. She must, first of all, give something in return. She is supposed to give herself up to him in order to get the money she wants. This incident increases her unhappiness, and she leaves him at once. She completely refuses the idea of prostituting herself for money.

Emma’s last wish was that she could at least have a simple death. Again she was disappointed even here, and ended up by dying in a great horrible agony. This tragic

5) Alvarez, pp. 87-88.

end is enhanced by the appearance of the blind beggar at her window at the moment she was dying. This time he was chanting: "Often the heat of a summer's day/Make a young girl dreams her heart away," and "The wind blew very hard that day/It blew her petticoat away." (*M.B.*, p. 978). Even the great Dr. Larivière came too late to save her or at least to reduce her pain.

In *Madame Bovary* we are thrown into the ugliness of the real world. We make the whole trip with Emma Bovary through her false romantic world. But though the real world is ugly and materialistic, it is still reality. Henry James sums up the whole idea when he says:

Life is, in fact, a battle. Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wickedness to carry the day; imbecile to be in great places, people of sense in small, and mankind generally unhappy. But the world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it.⁽⁶⁾

Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is another story in which the environment plays a vital role where Maggie, the heroine, causes her own destruction at the end. But it should be noted that the theme of the story focuses on the idea of the unreal view of life which Maggie adopts throughout the story. When asked about the purpose of writing the novel, Stephen Crane said:

'I had no other purpose in writing *Maggie* than to show people as they seem to me. If they be evil, make the most of it.' Maggie was evil because it exposed — without the customary built moralizing of the contemporary novel — what it was forbidden to expose.⁽⁷⁾

Crane's treatment of Maggie shows certain similarities with Flaubert's treatment of Emma, although from a different angle. Maggie and her family live in the slum section of the big city of New York where she and her brothers, Jimmie and the "babe" grow up in the corrupt and immoral atmosphere. However, unlike Emma Bovary, Maggie is in no way responsible for her own death. Her family, her neighbours and those whom she comes in contact with are mostly responsible for her downfall in one way or the other.

Maggie's parents are always drunk. They are constantly fighting each other breaking up all kinds of furniture and whatever happens to be in their way such as bottles and other objects. Maggie who lacks all sorts of love becomes the victim of the first man who shows her some kind of sympathy and passion. Pete seduces and deserts her; when she returns to her family, her mother makes fun of her:

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 285.

(7) Robert Wooster Stallman, ed. *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 8th ed. 1970), p. xxxviii.

“Ha, ha, ha” bellowed the Mother. “Dere she stands! Ain’ she purty; Lookut her! Ain’ she sweet, deh beast? Lookut her! ha, ha, lookut her!” She lurched forward and put her red and seamed hands upon her daughter’s face. She bent down and peered keenly up into the eyes of the girl. “Oh, she’s jes’ dessame as she ever was, ain’ she? She’s her murder’s party darlin’ yit, ain’ she? Lookut her, Jimmie (*Mag.*, pp. 88-89).

In fact, Maggie’s mother is the one who forces her daughter to abandon her house by her unreasonable “outrageous conduct,” especially when she is drunk: “Yeh’ve gone t’d’ devil Mag Johnson ... Yer a disgrace t’ yer people ... Get out. I won’t have sech as youse in me house!” (*Mag.*, p. 65). After Maggie’s death, her mother’s only response to her neighbor’s consolation is:

“Deh Lord gives and deh Lord takes away,” said the woman in black raising her eyes to the sunbeams.

“Deh Lord gives and deh Lord takes away,” responded the others.

“Yeh’ll fergive her, Mary!” pleaded the woman in black. The mother essayed to speak but her voice gave way. She shook her great shoulders frantically, in an agony of grief. Hot tears seemed to scaled her quivering face. Finally her voice came and arose like a scream of pain.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll fergive her! I’ll fergive her!”

Commenting on such a situation, Robert Wooster says that: “The grotesque buffoonery of this mock lamentation is comic enough, but tragedy underlines it in the theme that all is sham between mother and daughter.”⁽⁸⁾

Maggie’s father, Mr. Johnson, is as bad as her mother. He is always drunk. He never cares for his family or looks after his children. What concerns him is only himself. He objects when Mrs. Johnson beats Jimmie up because he wants to get some rest not because of concern or care for Jimmie: “Let the kid alone for a minute, will yeh, Mary? Yer allus poundin’ ‘im. When I come nights I can’t get no rest ‘cause yer poundin’ a kid.” (*Mag.*, p. 36). Thus, being such a neglectful and corrupted man Maggie’s father pushes her somehow toward adultery and suicide. By the same token Jimmie is also responsible for Maggie’s downfall. Jimmie is the one who brings Pete, the seducer, to the house. Like his parents, he never cares for his sister. They are all sadists, brutalizing Maggie and driving her into the streets. When Maggie is thrown out of the house Jimmie pays the matter no attention. His moral outrage starts only when he hears the neighbors comment on Maggie and on the whole family. He decides to go after her in order to bring her back home but his mother refuses. He thinks, for a while, that his sister would have been morally better if she just knew ‘how.” “Of course Jimmie publicly damned his sister that he might appear on a higher social plane. But arguing with himself, stumbling about in ways that he knew not, he once, almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly

8) Stallman, p. 18.

better had she known how. However, he felt that he could not hold such a view, He threw it hastily aside.” (*Mag.*, p. 81). He rejects the whole idea.

Pete, the seducer, is the main character in the story who destroys Maggie’s life. She sees him as a knight and he is to her the ideal man. When she goes out with him for the first time he takes her to a beer hall where she enjoys some stage shows. She really enjoys herself watching a wonderful world completely unknown to her. When she goes to the show for the second time, just right after she deserts her home to be with Pete, that show is presented and described to the reader in less detail. The first time the whole trip was romantic and full of excitement, but this time things have changed. Maggie, who has lost her chastity for the sake of excitement and romance, is no longer interested in the show. In this context, one may agree with Robert Wooster Stallman who pointed out that:

Crane’s *Maggie* is a Bovary version of Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary*. Maggie at the theatre and Emma at the opera parallel each other in ironic intent and structural purpose. Not logic but mood defines the relationship between the various episodes of *Maggie*.⁽⁹⁾

On the way out of the beer hall, Maggie sees two street walkers who reject and avoid her. When she goes to the beer hall for the third time, now she is deserted even by Pete, and she discovers that the show lacks any sort of entertainment. Her actual downfall begins at this stage. In fact, Pete looks at his love affair with Maggie as a kind of entertainment; but he really wishes a good relationship with Nell, who is turned to see him as a real fool. Maggie believes that her love for Pete will last forever, however, when he deserts her seeking another girl to seduce she loses hope and happiness.

Like Emma, when Maggie finds herself alone, deserted by all of those whom she loves, she decides to seek comfort in religion. To Maggie, religion is only a possible solution to her own problems. But like Father Bournisien, of *Madame Bovary*, the clergyman completely ignores Maggie:

Suddenly she came upon a stout gentleman in a silk hat and chaste black coat, whose decorous row of buttons reached from his chin to his knees. The girl had heard of the grace of God and she decided to approach this man ... But as the girl timidly accosted him he made a convulsive movement and saved his respectability by a vigorous side-step. He did not risk it to save a soul. For how was he to know that there was a soul before him that needed saving?

(*Mag.* p. 93)

So, when no one can understand Maggie’s needs and desires for a better life, she just directs her step toward the river to commit suicide because she finds out that her

(9) Ibid.

life is gradually becoming a nightmare and that there is no way out. Like Emma Bovary, Maggie, in a way, was also to be blamed for her own downfall when she adopted such romantic ideas and dreams. She simply believed in romantic love and imagined Pete as a knight who was going to rid her of her misery and disappointment in life.

The city was a place of sin and crime where unprotected and lonely girls like Maggie became the victims of their innocence. So, “innocence thwarted and betrayed by environment is the sum of Maggie,”⁽¹⁰⁾ who was basically pure and good, but her weakness and her romantic concept destroyed her. She had no will of her own. Commenting on this, Robert Wooster Stallman points out that:

Maggie as an expressionistic symbol of purity in a mud-puddle is Crane’s means of enforcing his large irony that purity is destroyed not by concrete evils but by the very moral codes established to safeguard... She is never really immoral. Throughout her fall, from her seduction by Pete to her plunge into the East River, Crane never dispels the impression that her purity and innocence remain. Her weakness is compounded out of the fact that her amoral environment has failed to arm her with moral strength (she “would have been more firmly good had she better known how”), while at the same time it has blinded her with self-destructive romantic illusions....⁽¹¹⁾

Thus, the moral and physical corruption and the sordid life of the slums which were full of diseases, crime and injustice, all these together, along with Maggie’s family, were the main elements which destroyed her. She had no alternative but to commit suicide.

“Maggie”, states Maurice Bassan, “is the result not of the action of her environment on a plastic personality, but rather of the reaction of that environment to the proposals made to it by her pretensions and her longings. She, not the environment, is the first mover.”⁽¹²⁾ That can also be said about Emma Bovary. Though they are both the first movers we believe that the environment is the main element in the downfall of the two heroines, Emma and Maggie.

There are many similarities and differences between Emma Bovary and Maggie. Emma is married to Charles but she pays no attention to his feelings and love. Maggie is not married but she loves Pete and she is very considerate in her love. Both really long for something new. Both are born with great passion for romance. Emma spends her time in the convent reading romantic poetry and novels, while Maggie spends her time day-dreaming and longing for romantic love. Both are shocked when they discover that life is not as romantic in reality as they have erroneously conceived

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

(11) Robert Wooster Stallman. *The New York City: Sketches of Stephen Crane* (New York: New York University Press, 1966), p. 115.

(12) Stallman, *New York City*, p. 109.

it to be. Both Emma and Maggie try religion as a way to solve their problems and both are rejected by the clergymen. Emma has two lovers, Rodolphe and Leon, who deceive and desert her. Maggie, on the other hand, has Pete, her only lover, who also deceives her. Thus, lack of comfort in religion, misleading romance, despair, depression, anguish and the inhumane, destructive environment, all these elements lead Emma and Maggie toward adultery and suicide. In his story, "Above All Things," Stephen Crane sums up the whole idea as follows:

If a man is not given a fair opportunity to be virtuous, if his environment chokes his moral aspirations, I say that he has got the one important cause of complaint and rebellion against society. Of course it is always possible to be a martyr, but then we do not wish to be martyrs. Martyrdom offers no inducements to the average mind. We prefer to be treated with justice and then martyrdom is not required... I am of the opinion that poverty of itself is no cause. It is something above and beyond.⁽¹³⁾

Whether they have any alternatives to suicide or not, Maggie and Emma deserve our sympathy. It is evident that neither Emma nor Maggie are fully responsible for their own deaths and that there are various factors and elements which, when combined together, cause the downfall of anyone in Maggie's and Emma's situations. The environment, a great passion for the world of the imagination, religion when it is viewed negatively or when it does not offer any solutions to our problems, despair, depression, anguish and the inhumane society, all of these are elements which have affected and changed Emma's and Maggie's lives.

(13) Joseph Katz, ed. *The Portable Stephen Crane*: (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 184-85.