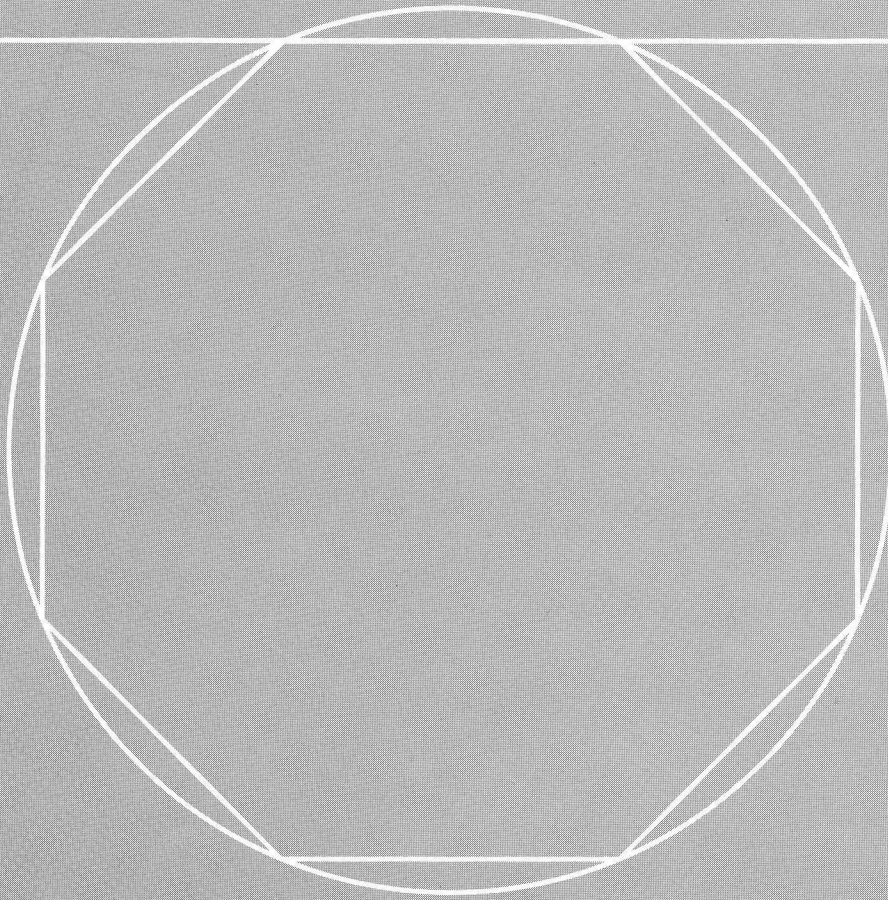


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Illness and Disease in the 19th Century Fiction of Balzac, Flaubert and Zola

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Zusammenfassung

Krankheit und Leiden im Naturalismus des 19. Jahrhunderts bei Balzac, Flaubert und Zola

Am Beispiel dreier bekannter französischer Romane des Naturalismus, »Louis Lambert« von Honoré de Balzac, »Madame Bovary« von Gustave Flaubert und »Thérèse Raquin« von Emile Zola, werden die engen Beziehungen zwischen Literatur und Medizin aufgezeigt. Die Darstellungen der psychischen Erkrankungen in den Romanen entsprechen den Entwicklungen der Medizin der Zeit. Die Interaktionen zwischen Medizin und Literatur sind Thema der vorliegenden Studie. Zum einen handelt es sich um eine Untersuchung der sozialen Konstruktion von Krankheit. Daneben wird gezeigt, wie medizinische Quellen in den Romanen verwandt wurden, um Wahnsinn als Krankheit zu beschreiben, und wie Literatur medizinisches Denken beeinflusst, indem die Reaktionen medizinischer und literarischer Zirkel auf die Romane untersucht werden.

Introduction

One might refer to the 19th century as 'the golden century', in medicine as well as in literature. It was a fruitful period in the development of scientific medicine, and at the same time romanticism and realism were upcoming movements in mainstream literature. These medical and literary developments led to the founding of a new kind of literary tradition: medical realism. France was a forerunner in the development of this genre, known for its abundant descriptions of disease and medicine. Well known examples are: "Louis Lambert" by Honoré de Balzac, "Madame Bovary" by Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola's "Thérèse Raquin".

Balzac wrote "Louis Lambert" between 1830 and 1832. The story gives a detailed description of Louis' youth and student years. On the eve of his wedding, he goes into a catatonic state. Only the peace and quiet of a dark room can heal his madness. He dies a few years later.

"Madame Bovary" was published in 1857. The novel describes the life of a young woman, Emma Bovary. She marries a country doctor, Charles Bovary, hoping for an exciting life. However, the mediocre doctor is unable to offer her this kind of lifestyle. Emma Bovary becomes increasingly dissatisfied and depressed. She has caprices and long reveries of escape. Desperately in search of love, she throws herself into the arms of her lovers. Eventually she finds herself trapped in a mesh of debt. When she no longer sees a way out, she commits suicide by taking arsenic. She dies an agonising death.

Emile Zola wrote "Thérèse Raquin" in 1867. Like Emma Bovary, Thérèse goes mad as a result of adultery that gets out of hand. Thérèse's temperament and environment drive her inevitably to her tragic decline.

Each of these stories is describing in detail one specific case of a mental disorder. As they are written in the beginning, the middle and in the second half of the 19th century, the representation of disease in these novels goes along with the developments in medical science of that area.

Within the field of 'literature and medicine' medical topics in "Madame Bovary" are abundantly described. Balzac's "Louis Lambert" and Zola's "Thérèse Raquin" are less extensively studied. In this research, scholars are often focusing on the medical content of the fictional accounts. Our aim is to study the interaction between literature and medicine.

Therefore, this article deals not only with the construction of disease in these three stories. Although we will show how medical sources of that era are used in these novels to depict madness as a disease, we are also investigating the influence of literature on medicine through an investigation of the reactions on the novels in medical and literary circles. Therefore, we are reviewing studies describing the representations of diseases in order to compare the medical representations of diseases in these three novels. Subsequently, we will describe the actual 'life history' of each of these novels. Finally, we will compare these findings, in order to clarify some patterns and mechanisms concerning disease, in order for us to try and grasp their contemporary significance.

In accordance with the guidelines of 'evidence-based science communication' of Van der Sanden and Meijman¹ we did a systematic literature search on articles and monographs concerning illness and disease in the work of Balzac, Flaubert and Zola in Internet-based bibliographical databases² and one hardcopy bibliography.³

Medical Representation of a Disease

Balzac's view of the mysterious disease of Louis Lambert is well known for its exhaustive style. The described causes of disease and the therapies are linked to the medical view of madness at the beginning of the 19th century. As passion was seen as being pathogenic, it was no coincidence that Lambert turned insane on the eve of his wedding. Louis Lambert was sent to Paris, renowned for being the centre of the medical developments in the 19th

1 Van der Sanden/Meijman (2004), pp. 272-287.

2 Specifically, we searched "Pubmed" and "Picarta" and the electronic catalogue of three university libraries: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam and Universiteit Gent.

3 Royce (1969).

century. There, the famous Parisian alienist – the former name for psychiatrist – Jean Etienne Esquirol (1772-1840) examines him. His meticulous report of the symptoms of Louis Lambert's catatonic condition is well known: his posture, his pale face, and the incessant friction of the bones, the fixed gaze and his dull and lifeless eyes. This depiction by Balzac is stunningly similar to Esquirol's description in "Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales" published in 1812.⁴

Balzac's style is filled with medical references and at the same time refers to existing medical authorities, without going too deeply into the contents of the medical theories of that time.

Flaubert's descriptions of diseases in "Madame Bovary" are notorious because of their accurate and medically correct representation based on medical sources. In particular Flaubert's description of a clubfoot operation has been almost literally copied from Vincent Duval's "Traité Pratique du Pied-Bot" (1834), an orthopaedic essay Flaubert refers to in his novel.⁵ Moreover the poisoning and the death of Emma are actually based on the symptoms described in the "Traité de médecine légale" by Mateo Orfila written in 1836 and the "Dictionnaire de médecine ou Répertoire général des sciences médicales considérées sous le rapport théorique et pratique", published in 1833.⁶

Flaubert's talent to transpose the contents of medical science into a novel is obvious in both medical scenes. The more that the description Emma Bovary's disease is solely restricted to one single sentence: "C'était une maladie nerveuse".⁷

Zola's description of disease in "Thérèse Raquin" is said to be the first novel fictionalising a medical case. The plot of the story illustrates how the biological constitution and the social circumstances of this young woman determine her state of mind. Zola has made no explicit referral to medical sources. However, according to various studies, the first signs of Prosper Lucas' influence can be identified in "Thérèse Raquin".⁸ He published "Traité philosophique et physiologique d'hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux" in 1850. The way Zola describes the nerves as being more or less 'the' autonomous driving system of human life, is comparable to Lucas' theory. Moreover, confirming the rising theories of neurology, Zola explains the nervous disease originating from physical causes.

4 Fizaine (1979), pp. 64-65.

5 Lambert (1931), pp. 200-202.

6 Siler (1931), pp. 719-746.

7 Flaubert (1991), p. 85.

8 Cabanes (1991), pp. 391-392; Mitterand (1999), p. 346; Thiher (2001), p. 135.

Viewing our analysis of the representation of diseases in these novels, each of them is based on the medical theories of that time. However, there is an elementary divergence concerning the precision of the medical reference.

As to the content of the medical description, Balzac's writing about the madness of Louis Lambert is correct, but rather superficial. Gustave Flaubert also provides quite accurate images of diseases, including references to medical sources, with the exception of Emma Bovary's insanity. The novel "Thérèse Raquin" by Emile Zola is the most close to the medical perception of that time, i. e. biological and social determinism.

Medical Representation of Diseases

| Disease of: | MEDICAL CONTENT | NARRATIVE FORM |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Louis Lambert | +/- | +/- |
| Emma Bovary | +/- | +/- |
| Thérèse Raquin | +++ | +++ |

| | CONTENT | NARRATIVE FORM |
|-----------|---------|----------------|
| Club foot | +++ | +++ |
| Poisoning | +++ | +++ |

Medical Reception

"Louis Lambert" had only just been completed when some medical doctors started to study 'the case' of Louis Lambert. Some alienists, who were the psychiatrists of that time, praised Balzac's competence to fictionalise the symptoms of Louis' insanity in this manner so that this novel could improve the understanding of insanity.

At the beginning of the 20th century "Louis Lambert" again raised medical interest, this time not as fiction but as a case of schizophrenia, although at the time of Balzac's writing schizophrenia had not yet been recognised as such. In 1927 the three phases in the course of the development of schizophrenia were found in Balzac's description of the disease: the schizoid period, the intermediate period, and the schizophrenia itself.⁹ In particular, the detailed description of the behaviour and the appearance of Lambert correspond to the symptoms of schizophrenia. Most mentioned in relation to this are Lamberts general apathy, his autistic behaviour, his wooden mannerism and his fixed mime. More recently, in 1998, Robert Smagda emphasises in a psychoanalytic study the importance of Balzac's depiction of the schizophrenia.¹⁰ In particular, the depersonalisation and the disturbed body image of Lambert were conceived as being typical features of this disease. For

9 Devic/Morin (1927), p. 310.

10 Smagda (1998), pp. 37-47.

more than fifty years and 150 years after publication, Balzac has received attention from a wide range of scholars who recognized schizophrenia in this depiction of the disease, each time on the basis of different arguments.

At the time of publication, Flaubert's "Madame Bovary" was controversial. Flaubert was sent to court in order to account for his obscene writing. Nevertheless, Charles Beaudelaire praised Flaubert's novel as it was, according to him, providing a great literary document of hysteria. "Hysteria! Why should not this physiological mystery be the matter and bedrock of a literary work, this mystery that the Academy of Medicine has not yet resolved", he wrote in *L'Artiste* of 1857. In Flaubert's representation of the mental illness of Emma Bovary, Beaudelaire recognized a typology of the hysterical woman that surpassed all medical attempts of the time. In 1880 a medical doctor Charles Richet, referred to "Madame Bovary" in his article "Les demoniques d'aujourd'hui" while explaining the exact meaning of hysteria.¹¹

According to these 19th century interpretations of both a writer and a doctor, Madame Bovary is an exact medical typology of hysteria rather than a literate case study. In 1995, more than a century after Richet, the historian Mark Micale defends this thesis in the medical journal *l'Evolution Psychiatrique*.¹² He argues why Bovary should be seen as a prototype of hysteria, an argumentation that was lacking in the 19th century. According to Micale, Flaubert had made a profile of hysteria that served as a model for the study of hysteria in the next decades. Micale refers to the "Traité des maladies", a study by Benedict Morel depicting hysterical madness as an exaggerated nervousness and eccentric behaviour. As said by Micale it is mainly Jean-Pierre Falret who developed a theory about mild hysteria in 1866. Falret describes hysteria as a rather negative characteristic, a state of eccentric, impulsive, emotionally unstable, false and sexually obsessed behaviour. After that, Micale mentions medical doctors such as Moreau de Tours in 1869, Ambroise Tardieu in 1872 and Henri Hunchard in 1882, who would have been influenced by Falret's characterisation of hysteria. After the emergence of Sigmund Freud's theory and the rise of the neurologically inspired models of Jean-Martin Charot, this depiction of hysteria has disappeared.

Micale attempts to provide a new analysis of Flaubert's "Madame Bovary" with the help of contemporary psychiatric manuals. He refers to so-called 'Histrionic Personality Disorder' in the "Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" of 1980, the so-called DSMIII. The essential features of this personality-disorder are the overly dramatic, reactive, and intensely expressed behaviour and characteristic disturbances in interpersonal relationships, characteristics that can also be attributed to Flaubert's Bovary.

11 Richet (1880), pp. 341-372.

12 Micale (1995), pp. 901-918.

Micale concludes: "D'un point de vue historique cet usage actuel n'est pas Briquetien, Charcotien, Janetien, Freudien ou Lacanien. Il est Flaubertien".¹³

The medical importance attributed to Flaubert's description of hysteria goes beyond the 19th century interpretation that only dealt with resemblances between medical and literate descriptions. According to Micale it is "un exemple d'ouvrage de fiction imaginaire, affectant de manière décisive la constitution de la théorie diagnostique".¹⁴ He relates the influence of Flaubert's story on the development of medical theories to the scandalous atmosphere surrounding the publication of this book. It was because of this scandal that medical doctors noticed the novel. The reading of "Madame Bovary" has influenced the development of theories on hysteria. Besides, in the second part of the 19th century a kind of 'medical culture' prevailed. Both doctors and writers frequented the same cultural scenes and in the literary meetings in Paris medical doctors were welcome guests. Therefore, it was not surprising that there was some kind of exchange between literary and medical spheres. This interaction between the literary and the medical world might explain why "Madame Bovary" has influenced the medical theories concerning hysteria.

Micale's analysis only concerns the similarities between the description by Flaubert and the later medical texts. However, his analysis is unable to explain the actual interest of medical doctors in "Madame Bovary". Even today, medical studies describe Emma Bovary's pathology at length and she is attributed with all kinds of diseases like eating disorders¹⁵, psychosis¹⁶, depression¹⁷, extreme narcissism¹⁸, and female perversion¹⁹.

Zola's "Thérèse Raquin" was a novel that also caused uproar. In order to respond to the sharp criticism addressed to him, Zola published a preface to the second edition of his novel in which he explains its purpose: "I have simply exercised some sort of dissection on two living beings, in the same way that anatomists do on dead bodies".²⁰

The violent drama in which Zola places his characters in "Thérèse Raquin" represents for Zola a kind of experimental research, comparable to a physiological experiment in a laboratory. In a limited setting (a haberdash-

13 Micale (1995), p. 911.

14 Micale (1995), p. 906.

15 Marder (1997), pp. 49-64.

16 Sanchez-Boudy (1969).

17 Leclerc (2002), pp. 42-44.

18 Arlow/Baudry (2002), pp. 213-233.

19 Kaplan (1991).

20 Zola (1999), p. 9.

ery at the Pont Neuf) two opposite temperaments are put together (Thérèse and Laurent) to examine the pathological effects of a particular biological and social make-up.

In "Thérèse Raquin", a first step is made to write a novel in accordance with a scientific intention to explain and predict scientific patterns. Zola wanted to bridge the gap between literature and science: "As the experimental method leads to knowledge of physical life, an experimental method in the literature should lead to knowledge of a passionate and intellectual life", he writes in "Le roman expérimental".²¹

However, according to Daniel Pick it is precisely this purpose of Zola's writing that insulted medical doctors.²² He refers to a medical doctor, Henri Nordeau, who states that science has nothing to do with fiction and to Martineau, who writes in his book "The scientific novel of Zola" that there is nothing less scientific than a scientific novel.

When comparing the medical response in these three novels one could conclude that medical appreciation is inversely proportional to the medical correctness of the novels.

Balzac, who is least accurate, receives most medical recognition, at the time of publication, as well as today.

In the case of Flaubert's description of Emma Bovary's 'nervous disorder', medical response could be explained by the uproar the book caused. According to some, this was precisely the reason why Madame Bovary was proclaimed as the prototype of a hysterical woman. Flaubert's description is said to have influenced the thinking about hysteria of the medical doctors of the 19th century. Nonetheless, this cannot explain why new studies recognising different syndromes still appear today.

Despite his attempts to develop a 'medical novel', Zola has not received any medical recognition, neither at the time of publication nor at present. Although the medical doctors weren't explicitly referring to his controversial political ideas, they might have been one of the reasons for the underestimation of his writings.

Medical Appreciation

| Representation of disease | At time of publication | End 19 th – beginning 20 th century | Currently |
|---------------------------|------------------------|---|-----------|
| Louis Lambert | +++ | ++ | + |
| Emma Bovary | - | ++++ | ++++ |
| Thérèse Raquin | --- | --- | --- |

21 Zola (1923), p. 5.

22 Pick (1989), pp. 74-90.

Literary Reception

Hippolyte Taine compares Balzac's style of writing with the work of an anatomist.²³ According to Taine, Balzac's analysis of his character is comparable to the pathologist dissecting a body. In "Louis Lambert", for example, Balzac writes a detailed and chronological account of Lambert's crisis, and presents these findings with clinical detachment and accuracy. The poor and incoherent statements of Lambert, which are reproduced word by word, are supposed to describe madness itself.

Today, the details and detachment that characterise Balzac's style are no longer appreciated. Balzac's style is considered to be rather old-fashioned. Currently "Louis Lambert" is only available in the collected works of Balzac, which might be seen as a sign of the decreased interest in this story.

The writer Sainte Beuve notes on Flaubert's writing: "Son and brother of distinguished medical men, Flaubert handles the pen like a scalpel".²⁴ Flaubert's detailed and vivid descriptions of Emma Bovary's daily life depict her sufferings deprived of any sentimentality or drama. To some, this is a sticking point. Gustave Merlet writes about Flaubert: "Jamais sa main ne tremble quand son scalpel se plonge avec sûreté dans les fibres palpitantes. Il n'entend pas les cris du patient qu'il dissèque".²⁵ To some of his contemporary writers, his style was controversial because of what was called brutality, lack of moral perspective and absence of feeling. Others, on the other hand, stress Flaubert's contribution to a new literary mode, known for its "scientific approach, accurate observations, maturity, strength and a little harshness".²⁶ Today, "Madame Bovary" is considered to be a literary classic because of both aspects of his style of writing.

Balzac and Flaubert were called 'anatomist-writer' by their contemporary critics, while Zola named himself an 'anatomic writer'. According to Zola, the position of the author is similar to that of a scientist. It is not a matter of a metaphorical comparison, it merely is the very ground of his naturalistic project. A writer should be an anatomist in order to unravel 'life as it is', plainly and without diffidence. Therefore, he is legitimate to break taboos on corporeality and sexuality. The comparison with a scientist pushes him to describe his observations in a clinical detailed way. It is this unashamed style of writing that caused rage and disgust. Many renowned writers fervently expressed their aversion to this genre of literature. 'Literature of pu-

23 Taine (1866), pp. 80-88.

24 Quoted in: Westerwelle (1993), p. 32.

25 Merlet (1880), pp. 114-115.

26 Heath (1992), p. 49.

trefaction' and 'rhetoric of the charnel house' are one of many statements referring to his style.²⁷

Nowadays, "Thérèse Raquin" is known for being the first novel in which a 'scientific' hypothesis is elaborated.²⁸

The 'anatomist-writers' are known for their detached, distanced and cold style of writing. Their contemporaries praise Balzac and Flaubert for this. Zola, however, could not count on any recognition by his colleagues.

Currently the literary appreciation seems to have shifted. At the time, Balzac's "Louis Lambert" was fashionable. Today, it has lost its literary interest. Flaubert seems to have written a timeless story. And Zola, who was originally despised for "Thérèse Raquin", receives far more literary recognition.

Literary Appreciation

| Representation of disease of | At time of publication | End 19 th – beginning 20 th century | Currently |
|------------------------------|------------------------|---|-----------|
| Louis Lambert | +/- | + | - |
| Emma Bovary | +/- | ++ | +++ |
| Thérèse Raquin | -- | + | ++ |

Illness and Disease in Medical Realism

We have attempted to show how these 19th century fictional accounts illuminate the interaction between literature and medicine in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, medicine was applied to literature because of the medical sources that were used to represent disease in a novel. This is a technique used in the three novels we have analysed. On the other hand, some of the stories also influenced the development of medical theory, e. g. the hysteria of Emma Bovary or the schizophrenia of Louis Lambert.

Moreover, some of these novels seem to have a contemporary importance, while others don't. Flaubert's novel in particular is still highly valued from a literary point of view as well as from a medical perspective. Although Balzac's "Louis Lambert" is still applicable to some medical interpretations, on the literary scene Balzac's story is fading away. Finally, Zola's "Thérèse Raquin" is no longer gaining any specific literary or medical attention.

One of the possible explications for the differences in the 'life histories' of these stories might be the different notion of disease that is depicted in each of these stories. Notably, Balzac and Zola use a different conception of disease in comparison with Flaubert. They describe a disease, in the medical sense of the word and they focus on the medical representation of this dis-

27 Ulbach (1868), Le Figaro du 23 Janvier 1868.

28 Mitterand (1999), p. 575.

ease, using medical theories of their time. Flaubert, on the other hand, does not use medical sources to describe the mental illness of Emma Bovary. Nevertheless, this novel is more appreciated by doctors than the other two.

Flaubert describes an illness, that is to say, the subjective experience of a disease. Because the suffering of illness is of all times, this might explain why "Madame Bovary" is such a timeless novel in comparison to the other two. In addition, this novel is attractive to medical doctors because of Flaubert's literary style which provides a medical presentation of illness. This was the reason why in 1880 Doctor Richet described the novel "Emma Bovary" as "the most correct and true" representation of hysteria:

It is not clear, based on Flaubert's engaging and accurate way of writing, if it is his ability to scientifically observe things or rather his artistic creativity that enables him to make such a sharp analysis of Madame Bovary's suffering.²⁹

Flaubert is not describing a disease, but life itself through his "coup d'oeil medical sur la vie".³⁰ Flaubert looks at Emma's inner life with a cold, detached and medical view. However, Flaubert's clinical view does not describe the life of Emma Bovary as pathology. On the contrary, he engages the imagination of his readers to read his novel as a description of an illness by describing the daily life of his character. Therefore, Flaubert's novel is medical in style, without describing disease in medical terms, in contrast to the aims of the two other writers.

Claudine Gothot-Mersh says about Flaubert's working method: "Son imagination voit volontiers les choses au microscope."³¹ A microscope not only enlarges all sorts of details that cannot be seen at first sight, it also allows an extension of the distance between the spectator and the research object. In "Madame Bovary", this moderating role is the task of a storyteller through whose eyes Flaubert looks indirectly at Emma Bovary's life. Additionally, the storyteller creates a distance between the author and his subject. This allows sufficient space to create a distant clinical representation of Madame Bovary's emotional life. Flaubert perceives through the lenses of the microscope the products of his own imagination. This might be a mental illness or a poisoning but may just as well be a case of melancholy, depression or neurosis, as contemporary doctors are interpreting "Madame Bovary". It is merely this description of her life from an imaginary point of view that dispenses Flaubert from any medical theories to describe the excesses of Emma Bovary. He prefers to lay her heart, or her soul, under the microscope.

This style, combining clinical accuracy and imagination, allows the novel to be read from different angles. "Madame Bovary" is a story about a mental

29 Richet (1880), pp. 348-349.

30 Gray (1980), p. 81.

31 Gothot-Mersch (1966), p. 244.

illness, written from a clinical point of view and with a scientific accuracy. From this perspective, it is a story about a disease; you may call it hysteria or a personality disorder. At the same time, "Madame Bovary" is a portrait of a young woman, suffering from an unfulfilled desire, a theme that is timeless and universal, and that is in some cases pathological. It is the result of Flaubert's mind's eye describing what it means to suffer from illness.



Flaubert disséquant *Madame Bovary* par A. Lorient

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