

Mieke Hart

12th Grade at Mona Shores High School

Submitted to Ms. Kimberly Bradshaw for AP Literature and Composition

Liberation through Death

22 Mar. 2019

Submission for John W. and Ruth V. Robinson Essay in the Humanities competition

Mieke Hart

Ms. Bradshaw

AP Lit (1st)

18 Jan. 2019

### Liberation Through Death

An incessant yearning is amplified as one ruefully contemplates the injustice and wretched state of one's conventional lifestyle. So bleak, so dull is this that one cannot help but feel dejected, hopeless, alone, drowned by one's sorrows, buried beneath one's misfortunes. One cries out for someone, something, some fulfillment. One's plea is answered, but is the immorality and degradation of character worth the amelioration of one's burning passion? Will one ever truly be fulfilled?

In academia, intellectuals reigning from all subject areas have ventured to explore the concept of desire. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, is responsible for building a psychological foundation for the explanation of desire ("Ego, superego, and id" 574). In a more spiritual sense, Siddhartha Gautama, arguably one of the world's most insightful thinkers, established Buddhism on a profound revelation he came to in his rumination: desire is the origin of suffering (Gunaratna 10). This proposition, though unaffiliated with religion, is ubiquitous in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, two novels in which the authors venture to explore desire within their respective realm. In both novels, the main characters, Catherine Earnshaw from *Wuthering Heights* and Emma Bovary from *Madame Bovary*, are unhealthily engrossed with and brutally tortured by their desires. Through a comprehensive comparison of both novels, one could assert that *Wuthering Heights*

and *Madame Bovary* are essentially the same, conveying that individuals will go to extreme lengths to fulfill their desires; and, if left unfulfilled, these desires lead to deleterious consequences.

A shared characteristic between Catherine Earnshaw and Emma Bovary is the prominence of the social class system in their everyday lives. This institution, entrenched in society, influences every aspect of the social landscape from friendships, to recreation, to careers, and to marriage. Catherine and Emma have virtually the same background with regard to status.

Living on the tempestuous Yorkshire moors, Catherine belongs to a middle class family, the Earnshaws, who develop strong relations with the neighboring upper-class family, the Lintons. As a result of this union, Catherine, formerly blithe and untamed, is exposed to the upper-class lifestyle. After an extended residence with the Lintons, Catherine undergoes sex-typing, “through which children learn what is expected of members of their gender and come to exhibit primarily those personality traits, behaviors, interests, and attitudes” (“Gender-identity formation” 667). Catherine returns to her home no longer a “wild, hatless little savage” (Brontë 52) but a “very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feather beaver, and a long cloth habit” (Brontë 52). This transformation instills within Catherine the societal expectations and practices by which she must abide and ignites a materialistic desire she struggles to extinguish for the remainder of her life. It is this background, this crucial period in her development, this exposure to a life that appears within her grasp, that Catherine develops an initial desire, a hunger seeking satisfaction solely from the acquisition of an upper-class lifestyle.

When Monsieur Rouault calls upon Doctor Charles Bovary to set his fractured leg, the reader is first introduced to Emma Rouault; she eventually becomes Emma Bovary when she marries the doctor. Through a conversation Charles has on his journey to the Rouault's home, he ascertains that "Monsieur Rouault must be one of the well-to-do farmers" (Flaubert 17). Before the reader is introduced to the character for whom the book is named, Madame Bovary, it is established that she is from wealth. Due to her status, Emma is afforded the opportunity to receive an education and abstain from arduous labor. She is not, however, a member of the aristocracy. Rather, she belongs to a high caste within the bourgeoisie, France's massive middle class, which encompasses a vast range of wealth from professional workers to artists (Gofen 52). Despite her actual status, Emma detaches herself from the middle class, aspiring to gain acceptance into the upper class. This dissociation is intensified when Emma attends a party hosted by a nobleman, the Marquis of Vaubyessard. Enchanted with the luxury and elegance of the aristocracy, Emma attempts to familiarize herself with its culture: she "devoured, without skipping a word, all the accounts [in Paris] of first nights, races, and soirees, took an interest in the debut of a singer...she knew the latest fashions, the addresses of the best tailors, the days of the Bois and the Opera" (Flaubert 57). This pursuit of knowledge becomes an obsession fueled by Emma's recognition of minor similarities between the upper class and her own, such as affluence and influence. These provide her with an opportunity to identify more closely with the aristocracy; however, Emma will never be accepted by the French noblemen, for she possesses no inherited title nor property that distinguishes the upper from the middle class (Gofen 52). Akin to Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Emma begins to swim against a treacherous current of desire; a current in which this obsession eventually causes her to drown.

As was typical of the time, when both Catherine and Emma become of age, they marry and assume domestic responsibilities. Historically, “for most middle-class...women marriage was an economic necessity. Legal rules, social practices, and economic structures all worked together to induce a woman to marry, and then insured that once married she would be dependent on and obedient to her husband” (Shanley 10). Marriage was conventional; it was a societal value. The atmosphere cultivated by the aforementioned laws, customs, and the economy placed an emphasis on marriage in a woman’s life. In addition to the encouragement from institutions, marriage, as shown in both novels, required the navigation through a plethora of complex societal expectations and formalities. Additionally, traditional gender roles enforced a life of domestic confinement upon both characters, who, despite reluctance, comply.

In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, class asserted itself as a major factor in marriage. Both characters have orchestrated marriages; however, a distinction can be made in the suitor each woman chooses. In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine’s father’s intent of his quasi adoption of Heathcliff is to eventually marry his “son” to Catherine. Jealous of the treatment Heathcliff is receiving from his father, Catherine’s brother Hindley grows bitter and when his father dies, usurps the Earnshaw property and parental responsibilities. With the help of his wife, Hindley grooms Catherine through his relationship with the Lintons, eventually prompting a marriage proposal from Edgar Linton. Catherine, despite her unwavering devotion to Heathcliff, makes a socially conscious and materialistically based decision to accept his proposal, claiming, “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now” (Brontë 80). With a clear understanding of her society’s expectations, a result of the aforementioned sex-typing, Catherine chooses a socially advantageous marriage. As argued by literary critic William Dean

Howells, "When they [Catherine and Heathcliff] are no longer girl and boy, and it is a question of her loving Heathcliff, she marries if she does not love Edgar Linton, of her own rank and kind..." (Howells 231-232). From a psychological perspective, it appears that Catherine is under the control of the ego, one of Freud's three components of the personality. In her situation, Catherine's ego "strives to fulfill the id impulses in a reasonable way while conforming to the superego's moral standards" ("Ego, superego, id" 575). Catherine's infatuation with Edgar's status and money has the potential to fulfill her materialistic desire, and this socially conscious marriage complies with her society's expectations. This reasoning impels Catherine into a marriage in which, although she is furnished with the luxuries of an upper-class life, she does not truly love her husband; a discordant marriage undermined by her ardent desire for Heathcliff.

Conversely, Emma entraps herself in an inauspicious marriage, believing herself enslaved by boredom and disgrace. In contrast to the idealized stories she has read of sensual romance, impassioned declarations of love, and grand gestures, Emma's marriage is a tragedy. Naive and inspired by fantasies, Emma promptly accepts the first marriage proposal she is presented. Her fiancé, Charles Bovary, belongs to the bourgeoisie but, despite his occupation as a doctor, is of a lower sub-class than Emma. Socially, this disparity complicates the marriage, as is the case between Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Monsieur Rouault, Emma's father, notes, "He certainly thought him [Charles] a little meagre, and not quite the son-in-law he would have liked..." (Flaubert 26). Blindly pursuing a romanticized idea, Emma impulsively surrenders her higher social status and upper bourgeoisie lifestyle to marry. Emma, similar to her counterpart, is merely infatuated with Charles, rather than actually being in love

with him. It is a mindless decision made with the hope that Charles would provide her with the glamorous life she envisions for herself rather than the ignominy, ennui, and consequential misery she ultimately experiences.

Regardless of the suitor each woman chooses, marriage is the oppressor that exposes Catherine's and Emma's underlying desires, resulting in their resignation to regression. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "notions of biological maternity and of female physiology justified the association of women with nature in opposition to culture; they designated woman's place within the family, the most basic biological and social unit" (Moscucci 4). As each woman marries the superego, "formed by the moral influences of parents and society, including rules and standards of conduct" ("Ego, Superego, and Id" 575), in her respective novel, her husband's inclination to observe social expectations and morality forces domestic confinement upon his wife; however, neither Edgar Linton nor Charles Bovary is malicious in intent. Oblivious to their wife's discontent, the husbands believe their partners to be equally enthusiastic about their domiciliary vision. In actuality, as the initial infatuation perishes, both Catherine and Emma become decreasingly invested in their marriages. Although having indulged some of their desires, the women recognize desires far more rapacious within themselves.

Considerate and family-oriented, Edgar Linton accommodates a spoiled and undeserving Catherine with the luxuries of his status and amenities of his estate. For a short time, Catherine fulfills her domestic duties, going as far as to carry Edgar's child. Despite the exceptional treatment she receives, Catherine, bereft of the freedom she formerly had, proclaims, "I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries,

not maddening under them!” (Brontë 125). Based solely on Catherine’s words, it could be ascertained that it is this state of unrestrained recreation to which she desires to return; however, in the context of the entire book, this is Catherine’s cry for Heathcliff, the enabler of this freedom, her friend, her genuine love interest. Inhibited by society and Catherine’s avarice, this relationship is preeminent among Catherine’s desires. This relationship is natural, authentic. It is love in its primitive form, passionate. It is the oxygen Catherine requires to evade asphyxiation; she can only be without it for a short period before she must seek replenishment or suffer the consequences.

As portrayed in *Madame Bovary*, the profession of a medical doctor in the nineteenth century entailed constant travel to patients, consequently resulting in Emma’s isolation. Charles, a sub-par doctor, also brings disgrace upon the Bovary name through his apprehensive, and on one occasion botched, treatment. Like Catherine, Emma fulfills her duties as the conventional housewife and gives birth to a daughter. After some time, however, Emma reflects upon her life: “she was waiting for something to happen. Like shipwrecked sailors, she turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life, seeking afar off some white sail in the mists of the horizon” (Flaubert 60). This simile highlights the misery and dejection Emma suffers as a married woman, feeling as though she is a victim of injustice, worthy of the aristocracy and deserving of the corresponding lifestyle. Charles’s absence amplifies her desire for companionship, for a relationship with a man similar to those of her fantasies. Similarly, Charles’s shortcomings in the medical fields intensify her desires for affluence and upper-class status. As fulfillment opportunities begin to present themselves, Emma finds herself in a



complex moral dilemma; though, an unsatiated hunger can only persist for a short duration before one must either satisfy it or die of malnutrition.

In *Wuthering Heights* and *Madame Bovary*, as the reality of Catherine's and Emma's situations becomes apparent, the two characters resolve to fulfill their desires. This commitment, although seemingly in the women's interests, ultimately results in their deterioration. It is a commitment to immorality, a commitment to infidelity, a commitment to self-centered desires, a commitment to the injury of themselves and others.

Love undisputedly exists between Catherine and Heathcliff, but it is only after they both marry other people that Catherine shares her genuine feelings with Heathcliff. At this point, a relationship is not a morally viable option; however, this does not inhibit Heathcliff after his hope is restored by Catherine's declaration of love. Undertaking a bold offensive pursuit for Catherine's affection, Heathcliff forges a relationship, eventually receiving from Catherine the vow that "...they may bury me twelve feet deep, and throw the church down over me, but I won't rest till you are with me. I never will!" (Brontë 125).

Through her "affair" - Catherine and Heathcliff do not have sexual relations but do have a clandestine relationship - Catherine should, in theory, satisfy her desire; however, she is caught in a state of confusion. Due to the conflicting nature of her desires, she can never fulfill one without leaving the other unfulfilled. Her love for Heathcliff is "The love which devours life itself, which devastates the present and desolates the future with unquenchable raging fire, has nothing less pure in it than flame or sunlight. And this passionate and ardent chastity is utterably and unmistakably spontaneous and unconscious" (Swinburne 524). This natural chemistry, this intimate connection, this intrinsic love for Heathcliff is unrivaled in

significance until Catherine is granted the opportunity to fulfill it. A full commitment to Heathcliff would result in Catherine's loss of Edgar and more importantly, his wealth and status. On the other hand, she could continue to possess the luxuries provided by Edgar at the expense of a relationship beyond brief surreptitious rendezvous with Heathcliff. This mental turmoil is the impetus propelling Catherine into a dark abyss of hysterics and moral emptiness. She deteriorates, unfulfilled, unhappy. In her final state, she is debilitated, out of touch with reality. Never liberated from the shackles of desire in her mortal life, Catherine dies in childbirth, restoring her soul to its former state of freedom.

Realizing Charles would not provide adequate satisfaction, Emma ventures out of her marriage on two occasions, once with Rodolphe Boulanger and later with Leon Dupuis. These are not mere "one-night stands" but actual relationships, both serving to exemplify Emma's destructive tendencies. The beginning of each of her relationships models the idealized romance of the stories Emma longed to experience for herself. As Emma's emotional connection to her lover grows deeper, her reliance on him for fulfillment increases as well. Desperate and delusional, Emma, like Catherine, becomes detached from reality, believing herself a genuinely happy person. However, as the initial thrill of romance fades away, Emma panics; for she does not realize that a decrease in intimacy and excitement does not necessarily mean a relationship has run its course but rather that it has transitioned into its next stage. Consumed by the fear of losing her partner, Emma overcompensates: she allows herself to be seen publicly with him and attempts to make long-term plans, such as eloping, early in the relationship. Her efforts, however, only drive her partner further away.

When ties between Emma and her paramour are eventually severed, she, similar to Catherine, is overcome by hysterics. Emma's split with Rodolphe, her first lover, is prompted by his disinclination to escape from Charles. Rodolphe writes Emma a letter indicating his unwillingness to continue their relationship, after which "He [Flaubert] renders her anguish by showing us her reactions to the heat of the attic, the sight of the weathercocks on the neighboring houses...and as a last touch her reaction to the savage, monotonous humming of Binet's lathe, which seems to be calling to her to throw herself out the window" (Gordon 109). While the misery she experiences in her marriage is a consequence of her impulsivity, the dejection in her affairs results from her destructive tendencies. The deleterious combination of high expectations, an unwillingness to compromise, and a penchant to make pessimistic assumptions destroys her illicit relationships. Upon losing her oasis in the barren desert of her life with Charles, Emma is crestfallen: she allows herself to sink into a deep depression and wallows in her misery. Considering that her sole aspiration has been shattered, Emma's reaction is warranted. Her agony depicts the torture of unfulfilled desire, the desire that independently dominates her life.

After committing adultery, Emma falls into the same morally-void abyss as Catherine. She debases herself, buries herself deeply in debt, and prepares to prostitute herself in order to avoid incarceration. At her most wretched state, Emma realizes, "She was not happy - she had never been. Whence came this insufficiency in life - this instantaneous turning to decay of everything on which she learnt?" (Flaubert 263). Emma operated by delusion, for she manipulated her own mind into believing she was happy when, in actuality, she was not. This revelation enlightens Emma with the unfortunate reality that she had never been satisfied,

motivating her to pursue the only solution that would do her justice: suicide. It is in death again that a woman finds solace from the oppressive desires from which she suffers.

Humans are inclined to operate with the intent of attaining a state of contentment. Whether that be reached through the accumulation of wealth, the affections of a lover, or the acclamation of a superior, these desires, although meager in appearance, can prove to have massively adverse effects on an individual. Through a comprehensive analysis of the characters Catherine Linton and Emma Bovary, from Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, respectively, the conduct of both women contribute to the overarching theme that individuals will resort to extreme measures to satisfy their desires; and if left unsatisfied, inimical consequences ensue. If anything can be ascertained from these novels it is that with obsessive desire comes considerable destruction.

## Works Cited

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. Barnes & Noble Classics, Barnes & Noble Books:

New

York, 2004.

“Ego, superego, and id.” *Magill’s Encyclopedia of Social Science Psychology*, 1st Printing,

2003,

pp. 574-575.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Translated by Eleanor Marx Aveling, Barnes & Noble

Classics, Barnes & Noble Books: New York, 2005.

“Gender-identity formation.” *Magill’s Encyclopedia of Social Science Psychology*, 1st Printing,

2003, p. 667.

Gofen, Ethel Caro. *Cultures of the World France*, Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1999, p.52.

Gordon, Caroline. *How to Read a Novel*. The Viking Press, 1964, p. 109, New York.

Gunaratna, V.F. *The Significance of the Four Noble Truths*. Buddhist Publication Society, 1968,

Kandy, Sri Lanka, p. 10.

<[http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh123\\_Gunaratna\\_The-Significance-of-the-Four-Noble-Truths.pdf](http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh123_Gunaratna_The-Significance-of-the-Four-Noble-Truths.pdf)>

Howells, William Dean. *Heroines of Fiction*. Vol. 1, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1901, pp.

231-232, New York and London. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

<<https://books.google.com/books?id=pULQAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA1&ots=11cr3hIMiP&dq=%22heroines%20of%20nineteenth%20century%20fiction%22%20howells&pg=PP2#v=onepage&q=231&f=false>>

Moscucci, Ornella. "The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England 1800-1929."

*Cambridge History of Medicine*, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990,

p.

4. Accessed 17 Jan. 2019.

<[https://books.google.com/books?id=szmnVZs\\_ImsC&lpq=PP1&dq=inauthor%3A%22Ornella%20Moscucci%22&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=szmnVZs_ImsC&lpq=PP1&dq=inauthor%3A%22Ornella%20Moscucci%22&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false)>

Shanley, Mary Lyndon. *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England*. Princeton

University Press, 1989, p. 10, Princeton. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

<<https://books.google.com/books?id=pIdVMWQf-p0C&lpq=PP1&dq=feminism%20marriage%20and%20law%20in%20victorian%20england&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=feminism%20marriage%20and%20law%20in%20victorian%20england&f=false>>

Swinburne, Algernon Charles. "Miscellanies." *The Library of Literary Criticism of English and*

*American Authors*, Charles Wells Moulton, Moulton Publishing Company, 1959, p. 524.