

# Madame Bovary in the Context of Greimas' "Semiotic Rectangle" Theory

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**Abstract**—Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992) was a famous French structuralist linguist who developed the famous “semiotic rectangle” theory to reveal the rich connections behind complex things. *Madame Bovary* is one of the masterpieces of the famous French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), in this novel, the heroine Emma keeps trying to pursue romantic love, but finally chooses to end her life by taking poison due to debt. Based on Grimes' “semiotic rectangle” theory, this article analyzes character relationships on a structural level in order to fully reveal the surface and deep connotations of the text. The results show that Flaubert criticizes vulgar romanticism and bourgeois characters by establishing several pairs of opposing relationships, and that the fundamental source of the tragedy that led to Emma's life was the social climate of the time, in which people betrayed each other.

**Index Terms**—Greimas, semiotic rectangle, Emma, romanticism

## I. INTRODUCTION

A famous French master of structuralist linguistics, Greimas developed the theory of the “semiotic rectangle” based on the “binary opposition” of fellow master Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009), extending the binary to the quaternion. In addition, he extended the research method of structural semantics to narrative analysis, making narrative more complete and profound. This model of semiotic analysis takes the question of meaning as its starting point, deduces the deep structure hidden under the surface structure through semantic relations, and establishes a more complete theory of narrative [1].

In his works *Semantique Structurale* (1966) and *Du Sens* (1970), Greimas borrowed the matrix form of logic and defined the “semiotic rectangle” as “a logically connected representation of a visible semantic category” [2, 3]. This approach is the most basic structure of meaning. The theoretical formulation is as shown Fig. 1 [1]:

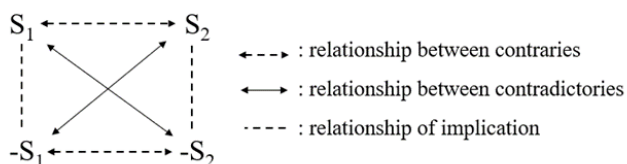


Fig. 1. The semiotic rectangle.

These four terms have the following three kinds of relationships:

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$S_1$  and  $S_2$ : Contrast between opposite terms

$S_1$  and  $-S_2$ ,  $S_2$  and  $-S_1$ : The contradictory relationship between contradictory terms

$S_1$  and  $-S_1$ ,  $S_2$  and  $-S_2$ : Linkage (or complementary relationship)

This theory consists of oppositional and contradictory relationships, with the oppositional relationships being the most important and the contradictory relationships being complementary. The four elements involved in the matrix can be either concrete people, things or objects, or abstract ideas or values, and the meaning of the text is generated in the operation of the relationship between the four elements [1].

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a novel about the disillusionment of its protagonist's love. Emma, the heroine of the novel, was born into an ordinary family in a rural area. Although her family is poor, she was influenced by romantic literature and traditional religious upbringing, and she constantly fantasized about an extravagant life. After Emma grew up, she married Dr. Bovary who was also from an ordinary family. Then Emma committed adultery because she was dissatisfied with the blandness of the couple's life, finally lost her reputation and committed suicide by taking poison. In the contradiction between real life and fantasy life, Emma's unrealistic fantasy and pursuit of romantic love led to her own eventual demise.

This paper will analyze *Madame Bovary* in the context of Greimas' semiotic theory and will analyze the character relationships in the work on a structuralist level in order to reveal the connotation of the novel.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Greimas' "Semiotic Rectangle" Theory

In the field of literary criticism, Greimas' theory is widely used in the analysis of literary narratives [4].

Li and He [1] used Greimas' theory as the basic method to reorganize and analyze the relationships between several important characters in Chinese masterpiece *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, such as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, and to reveal the deep logical structure and ideological connotation of the text, in order to better grasp the artistic and cultural values of the novel.

Yang [5] analyzed the textual factors and cultural contexts in *Pride and Prejudice* with the Love Matrix and the Rights Matrix to fully understand the dimension of the characters' relationships.

Using the semiotic theory of Greimas, Yang [6] analyzed the relationship between the characters and the narrative of *Truman's World* from a new perspective, thus revealing the deeper connotation of the film under the theory and the deeper reflection on freedom triggered by this connotation.

In American critic F. Jameson's view, the positive significance of structuralist narrative form analysis lies not only in finding the deep narrative structure of a text and discovering its compositional secrets, but also in discovering the unique "compositional form" of a text and the role of deep narrative logic as an aid to the interpretation of macro literary criticism [4].

Therefore, in Jameson's Marxist hermeneutic criticism, Greimas' "Semiotic Rectangle" is rightly used as a trustworthy auxiliary analytical tool, the "core" and starting point of cultural hermeneutic criticism [4].

### B. Madame Bovary

*Madame Bovary*, a classic of French literature, is a rich source of research in the field of literary criticism.

Ma [7] analyzed the narratives of three letters in *Madame Bovary*, discussed how these narratives present the fate of the characters and ran through the core plot of the novel, then used them as a basis for understanding the metaphors, reflections on human language and literature contained in the novel's narratives.

Wu [8] analyzed the original novel and the BBC film in terms of Emma's physical presentation, the rewriting of Emma's readership and the causes of her tragedy, providing a new perspective for the reinterpretation of the literary classic through the dual "reading" of the text and the film.

Starting from the description of environment in *Madame Bovary*, Guo [9] analyzed the specific expression of the aesthetics of environmental translation in the work.

By analyzing the always hidden narrative subject and its implied meaning in *Madame Bovary*, Liu [10] showed that such a narrative strategy shows Flaubert's choice to face the emptiness of existence: play. This is the writer's way of transcending reality and poetizing it.

To sum up, since current research focuses mainly on metaphors, film adaptations, environmental descriptions, and narrative strategies of novels, this study will start from a structuralist approach, using semiotic theory to construct character relationships and reveal textual connotations.

### III. CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS IN MADAME BOVARY

The entire novel of *Madame Bovary* is a passionate trilogy of Emma's three psychological journeys, from her pursuit of happiness, to her fall into misunderstanding, to her despair and suicide. This series of image transformations shows the process of the destruction of her romantic dreams in her life.

In addition, the heroine is referred to in the novel by two terms: "Emma" and "Madame Bovary". The two form a sharp and suggestive contrast, and even the superficial sounds and forms of language suggest an incommensurable opposition. "Emma" is a country girl, full of life to the point of excess, with endless longings, desires, and a tendency to indulge. But Emma, having left the convent, cannot change her fate as "Madame Bovary", because the sacred rite of passage with a different title determines her future destiny, and the woman in Flaubert's book begins the story of "Emma" and "Madame Bovary" [11].

In this story, assuming the heroine Emma as "S<sub>1</sub>" in the semiotic rectangle, she is the representative of romanticism, then the opposite "S<sub>2</sub>" is her husband Charlie, the

representative of realism. After marriage, Emma becomes "Madame Bovary". Her thinking becomes more and more vulgar, after failing to elope with Rodolphe, she reunites with Leon for a weekly rendezvous at the hotel, narrowing her romantic dream world to Paris to even a hotel room, thus "Madame Bovary" identity as "-S<sub>2</sub>". What's more, the two lovers of Emma, Leon and Rodolfo are the so-called romantic love in Emma's mind that she has been pursuing, forming a contradictory relationship with mediocre Charlie, regarded as "-S<sub>1</sub>" in Fig. 2.

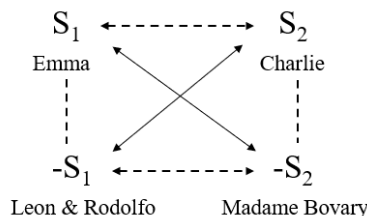


Fig. 2. The character relationships

### IV. THE SEMIOTIC RECTANGLE IN MADAME BOVARY

In order to analyze the character relationships and the deeper connotations of the novel more thoroughly, the relationships of the various characters are divided into the following groups for analysis.

#### A. S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>: Realism and Romanticism

S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>, Emma and Charlie are at once the antithesis of romanticism and realism. Charlie Bovary is clumsy, intellectually weak and without ideals. He did what his mother told him. He wanted Emma to marry him, but did not dare to ask her, so his father-in-law made the decision. However, he was not embarrassed and did not feel pain when Emma wanted to keep her distance from him.

Although Emma was born into an ordinary peasant family, she grew up in a convent and received an aristocratic education. Influenced by the mystery of religion and the fantasy of romance novels, she aspired to the extravagant life of high society and dreamed of legendary love. Like all romantics, Emma loved not the thing itself, but the pleasure and romance it brought. She believed that marriage should always be full of freshness and excitement, and she dreamed of a thrilling, extraordinary love, a great love that would be noticed by all [12].

The ideological opposition between Emma and Charlie is a meeting of realism and romanticism, and the beginning of the tragedy of Emma's life lies in this most fundamental and oppositional relationship. She spent her life in search of love, but the only one who truly loved her was the man she despised. The union between Char and Emma was a mistake from the beginning to the end. Char was a person without character and thought, totally incompatible with Emma, who was naturally high-minded. Char was born to be Emma's antagonist, and his vulgarity became a stumbling block on the road to Emma's so-called romantic love [13].

#### B. S<sub>1</sub> and -S<sub>2</sub>: Romance and Vulgar

S<sub>1</sub> and -S<sub>2</sub>, the contradiction between Emma and "Madame Bovary" is also the transformation of her identity from before-marriage to after-marriage [11]. Before this marriage,

Emma lived only for herself, a romantic girl who was a seeker of romantic love and had a beautiful wish and vision of her future married life. After marriage, she became Mrs. Bovary and began to live as a wife, no longer as an innocent girl living for herself, but as a wife with more responsibilities, having to do the things a wife has to do, dealing with the chores of daily life, and adapting to the changes that come with it [12].

At the beginning of her marriage, the dreamer was still full of hope for the future, but as the trivialities of family life, her husband's mediocrity and incompetence continued to occupy her life, Emma felt bored and could not bear such a dull marriage and quiet life, which was in complete conflict with her ideal of love [14, 15]. Without a handsome and charming prince or courageous vows, Emma's infidelity seemed inevitable. The initial "platonic love" with Leon allowed Emma to taste the excitement of infidelity, and after the appearance of the playboy Rodolfo, she was fully indulged in the pleasures of extramarital affairs. She despised her husband, but her lovers, Rodolfo and Leon, were mere props in her world, fully satisfying Emma's desire for the ideal love: passionate, exciting, and thrilling. But such a life is not the way to achieve Emma's ideal of love. Emma and Leon could no longer surprise each other after countless love affairs, indicating that Emma's unrealistic and exciting view of love cannot find a living ground in the real world. She built an ideal land of romance and excitement and wandered in it for a long time, unwilling to wake up, seeking only endless pleasure and crazy sensual enjoyment. This lack of rationality and reason in love seemed to contradict the banality of real life, so Emma could only live a life of painful psychological contradictions and conflicts between spirit and flesh, life and death, reason and emotion, happiness and emptiness, freedom and bondage. Emma not only disappointed her husband's true love, but also had no real love for her lover, and was eventually destroyed.

Thus, the transformation of Emma's identity from a maid to "Madame Bovary" is the beginning of the gradual vulgarization of her romanticism. Emma kept her pursuit of romance but fell into vulgarity, which was actually a fusion of two completely different attributes, and in a sense, Emma was a victim of vulgar romanticism, and her narrow understanding of love led to her tragic end [16–17]. Although in reality, everyone has the ability to pursue their own happiness, Emma also wants to change the status quo of her life, but she chose to do too extreme and unwise, from this, Emma and "Madame Bovary" the role of a greater conflict between.

### *C. S<sub>2</sub> and -S<sub>1</sub>: Ethic and Desire*

It is the contrast between Char and Emma's lovers. Char, realistic and banal, Emma's husband, was the representative of ethics. While Leon and Rodolfo seemed to correspond to Emma's ideal of love: exciting, dreamy, romantic, seemingly "non-realistic", "non-banal", but in fact they were the representatives of hypocrisy and vulgarity of elegance, and the embodiment of Emma's desire as well.

Char was the secular sense of Emma's moral and ethical adherence, although mediocre, he behaved gentle, kind, upright, loyal and generous. Flaubert did not portray Charles as a comic character, but rather as one with tragic elements.

In contrast to Emma's two extramarital lovers, one of whom was shy and the other selfish and heartless, after Emma's death, Char preferred to pay debts rather than sell her things to repay them, and even buried Emma with love. Moreover, Char did not blame Emma when he discovered her affairs, but hated himself for not being her lover, and even held a lock of Emma's hair in his hand until his death. Charlie's tragedy is that Emma is not a woman worthy of infatuation.

From Emma's point of view, the destruction of the romantic dream took place step by step. At the beginning, when she had a mutual affection with the young man Leon, although she could feel Leon's feelings for her, she had to act like a cold and virtuous lady to refuse him because of her identity, and went to the church to confess with great spiritual pain, which was an internal moral and ethical struggle. After Leon's departure for Paris, the end of this "platonic love" that no one knew about made Emma more and more disgusted with her current situation and her mediocre and incompetent husband in the mundane life, and at this time the balance between the ethical struggle and the outburst of desire gradually tilted.

Emma's first lover, Rodolfo, a wealthy man who specializes in flowery characters, has evil intentions when he first sees the stunningly beautiful Emma, and he immediately sees Emma's restlessness and desire for love: "She is as eager for love as a carp on an anvil is for water. Just three words of love and she's convinced!" [18] But then the face of a light-hearted man is revealed, thinking about how to get rid of Emma when he is tired of playing. He had shed his romantic facade, but he was still a hypocritical, mean-spirited, flamboyant villain. "Since love was as solid as a mountain, he no longer bothered to fight for it, and unconsciously his attitude changed", "Rodolfo manipulated his mistress as he pleased" [18]. More and more Rodolfo did not hide his coldness, and when the infatuated Emma offered to elope with him, Rodolfo outwardly agreed, but actually thought: "Trouble, the expense ..... ah, no, no, a thousand no's! Who would do such a foolish thing!" [18] Rodolfo made up some nice excuses, wrote a "sorrowful" separation letter, and sprinkled a few drops of water as tears. He firmly rejected Emma and left, leaving Emma alone to swallow the bitter fruit of her lost love.

Although Emma, "after her rendezvous with Rodolfo and then with Charles, found her husband particularly annoying, with his square nails, his clumsy mind, and his vulgar manners" [18], she also wavered: "She even asked herself: Why did she hate Charles? Wouldn't it be better if I could love him?" [18] This idea was finally put to rest completely by Char's failed surgery, which rekindled Emma's desire to cheat.

Emma met Leon again after the heavy blow of Rodolfo's abandonment. By this time, Leon had long since become a different person, having been exposed to the "romantic atmosphere" of Paris, his fear had long since disappeared. In the face of Leon's vehement pursuit, even if Emma was still hesitant in the church prayer, but the two soon rekindled their old love. But there is no difference between Leon and Rodolfo. Leon reunited with Emma and, burning with lust, roughly possessed his beloved in the carriage. He claimed to be particularly fond of poetry, but when Emma asked him for a poem, "he couldn't rhyme until the second line, so he

copied a sonnet from a souvenir book and did it perfunctorily” [18]. As the relationship progressed, he began to tire of Emma. At the same time, he was about to be promoted to chief clerk, and for the sake of his future, Leon ruthlessly dumped her, too.

Flaubert criticized Emma’s concept of happiness as a “permanent mixture of ass and heart” [18]. Rodolfo and Leon are typical of this kind of love, full of carnal desire. They have chosen to go with the flow, completely losing the meaning of human existence. Their love seems glorious and passionate, but it is not sincere. This is also the inevitable product of the vicious culture under the capitalist system of pursuing personal interests and the desire for money and sex. Both Rodolfo and Leon successively become Emma’s lovers, but both mercilessly abandon her. Their love for Emma seems to be a sensational and romantic excitement, but in fact it is a degenerate attitude to life and extreme selfishness in the pursuit of money and status, which is full of vulgarity. Thus, Rodolfo and Leon are outwardly elegant but inwardly vulgar. They are the same as the mediocre citizens of the time, profit-oriented, concerned with personal appearance, and buried all day long in matters of sex and pleasure. They are the representatives of the vulgar, selfish and despicable characters whose meanness and shamelessness are revealed at the critical moment [13].

Thus, in this relationship, there is not only the struggle and conflict between Emma’s inner ethics and desires, but also the strong contrast between the sincerity of Char’s mediocrity and vulgarity under Leon and Rodolfo’s elegant appearance.

## V. CONCLUSION

This essay uses a structuralist approach to analyze the relationships between three pairs of characters. In this novel, Flaubert established several pairs of opposites, used individualized language to depict characters, used romantic language to show romantic personalities, made romanticism also a part of realism, and criticized vulgar romanticism by exposing vulgar bourgeois characters. After using Greimas’ semiotic rectangle to analyze the characters’ relationships, the deeper connotation of the text can be more clearly understood [4], that is, the fundamental source of the tragedy that led to Emma’s life lies in the social atmosphere of that time, where people are deceitful to each other. Emma was determined to find romantic love and an extravagant life, but in the process of pursuing this unrealistic ideal, she became a plaything for others to amuse and discard at will. These lovers approached Emma for pleasure and money without regard for her feelings, which traumatized her emotionally. Emma squandered the savings of her husband, the only one who truly loved her, and began borrowing from loan sharks that she could not repay, ending up with a disgraced and broken family. She pleaded with her illicit lovers, but none of them helped her; she pleaded with the tax collector, but he was completely unmoved; she sought help from a notary, but the notary had ulterior motives to dominate her; finally, Emma had no choice but to end her own life. Thus, it could be said that the degenerate society basically led to Emma’s destruction.

In fact, in the mid-19th century, European capitalism was still in its infancy and the feudal hierarchy was very strict. In

such a society, women had no dignity or status to speak of [15]. From birth, women were instilled with the idea that they would be dependent on men, whether ideologically, materially, or intellectually. This social environment and traditional beliefs were at odds with Emma’s thoughts and ideas. Emma was unable to change this social reality, so it was inevitable that she would become a victim of it.

Flaubert’s works were based on life, but higher than life, reflecting a projection of reality and a microcosm of society. Through *Madame Bovary*, he deeply criticized the current state of French society in the mid-19th century and revealed the fundamental causes of Emma’s tragic life.

However, there are also shortcomings in this essay. First, this study only examines character relationships from a structuralist perspective, the accuracy of assigning values to roles can be further discussed. Secondly, this paper takes several pairs of opposing character relationships as the starting point for analysis, to some extent ignoring the work as a whole. Finally, the study also fails to explore the impact of different relationships on plot progression and different characterization from the novel itself. It is hoped that future research in this area will continue to rethink about these aspects.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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