

A PASSION TO END ALL LOVE

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If ever there has been a problem that has plagued the world, it has been the pursuit of passion. The pursuit of passion, or the desire to avoid it, creates heartache and confusion for nearly everyone. Some people learn to deal with their love of passion, but others are constantly looking for "the one" who will keep romance and passion alive indefinitely. A person's gender apparently has no bearing on whether he or she seeks out passion, since both Emma Bovary and Jean-Paul Sartre were guilty of being in love with passion. Yet their lifelong mates, Charles Bovary and Simone de Beauvoir, were relatively complacent and had no need of constant romantic stimulation.

While the pursuit of passion is usually characterized as a female trait, thanks perhaps to the fictional Emma Bovary, Jean-Paul Sartre defied stereotype. He believed in two kinds of love: "essential" love, which creates a deep, lifelong spiritual bond, and "contingent" love, the kind that remains passionate for anywhere from a half hour to several years. The essential love was the kind he had with his life partner, Simone de Beauvoir. Contingent love is what he had with everyone he could. Whereas many people would have been happy to find a person like Simone de Beauvoir, a steady and understanding mate, for Jean-Paul she was not enough. In his mind, without the passion provided by sexual encounters with many different people, he could not be happy and fulfilled.

Whatever her reasons, Simone de Beauvoir put up with Jean-Paul Sartre's life style. Many people consider Beauvoir the leading feminist of her day, but in practice she was like so many middle-class women of her time. She simply did what Jean-Paul wanted because she was afraid of losing such a "good man." Her role in their relationship was that of the *very* understanding wife, even if they were not married.

Some people might say that Beauvoir was not exactly an innocent player in this contingent game, but I would have to disagree. She played around with many people, creating a three-party relationship with Sartre and the extra, but one must consider the fact that most of those relationships were arranged *because* he liked *them*, and *she* loved *him*. As for Simone's "other lover," Nelson Algren, it must be remembered that she gave up her passionate affair with him to stay with the man to whom she had long before declared a lifetime commitment. All of these facts led to a low-passion, low-maintenance woman who was completely devoted to her man even if he liked to wander.

Gender roles were reversed for Emma and Charles in Gustave Flaubert's 1857 novel *Madame Bovary*. To understand Emma's problem, we have to examine her reaction to reading novels. Apparently in the mid-nineteenth century novels were considered a corrupting influence on the mind, and especially on the minds of impressionable young ladies. Emma had been

corrupted. She was absolutely hooked on romance novels and therefore did not believe that any love could be real without passion and danger. In her pursuit of passion, she married the loving but totally naive Charles Bovary. Having found not even a spark of romance in him, she moved on to another man, and then another, never finding whatever it was she thought she wanted. Each affair, imagined or real, became a disaster because she always wanted it to be more than it was: more passionate, more dangerous. When one affair did not work out, it made the next one an even bigger disaster, until this spiral led to her eventual suicide by poison. And all of this trouble began because she wanted passion.

Charles, the bumbling husband, turns out in the end to be the "essential" love for Emma that Simone de Beauvoir was for Jean-Paul Sartre. Nevertheless, he ended up alone, broken and penniless. Throughout their marriage, Charles had been totally happy and content just to have the beautiful Emma as his wife. He wanted nothing more than a stable life and a happy wife, but Emma gave him neither. A good bourgeois wife of the nineteenth century might have waited patiently for her husband to return home from some sexual but low-passion affair, but most certainly would not have had one themselves.

Some people might consider Emma Bovary to be a feminist of sorts. She defied the rules to seek out her own pleasure. But in the process, she hurt people, and she never succeeded in her goal. What made Flaubert's novel a scandal was the fact that Emma was a woman who took her quest for passion into her own hands and left her husband behind in the dust. There would never have been a controversy over the novel if the title character had been a man pursuing myriad affairs. Emma Bovary is the reason passion seekers to this day are usually assumed to be female. Emma, of course, got what she "deserved" when she committed suicide. Death is still the cure-all for female dissent in all forms of popular media.

Simone de Beauvoir and Gustave Flaubert tell the same story in their books. They both describe someone who uses and abuses a trusting and devoted lover in the name of eternal passion. It is of interest to note that something bad happens to the female member of the couple in each of these accounts, one fictional and one autobiographical. In Flaubert's novel, Emma must die in the end because, after all, a woman cannot cheat on her partner and live. In Beauvoir's memoirs, it becomes apparent that it is *she* who pays the price, not the roaming heart Sartre. She had to give up her chance to share her life with a real lover who had mutual respect for her as a philosopher and writer *and* as a person. Sartre provided only one aspect of that kind of relationship for Beauvoir.

Passion can rob relationships of love and lead one member of a couple to search constantly for a new source of excitement while the other waits patiently on the sidelines. Gustave Flaubert and Simone de Beauvoir have demonstrated that passion seekers can be either male or female and that either sex can be the victim of the ravages of this strong emotion glorified in romantic novels.

SIRENA PUTMAN was a student in Yolanda Patterson's spring 2001 freshman cluster section entitled "Gender in Francophone Literature and Culture" at California State University, Hayward. The assignment for this essay was to compare and contrast two of the couples we had discussed in class. Sirena describes herself as "one of the lucky few who graduated from high school in the year 2000." From there she went directly to California State University, Hayward, where she will soon be a sophomore. She became interested in Simone de Beauvoir after taking four classes during the three quarters of her freshman year that examined the famous French philosopher's theories and practices. She hopes that her future will include graduating from college, taking a self-directed tour of North America, and having original works of her own published.