Flaubert's Parrot Study Guide

Flaubert's Parrot by Julian Barnes

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Plot Summary

Flaubert's Parrot tells the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, an English doctor who is obsessed with Gustave Flaubert. Geoffrey states that he has three stories to tell: Flaubert's, his own, and his wife Ellen's. The novel is comprised partly of fiction and partly of literary criticism, as the book traces Geoffrey's search for the "facts" about Flaubert and his work. Geoffrey discovers that two museums containing items of Flaubert's claim to own the stuffed parrot that Flaubert once borrowed from the Museum of Natural History. Geoffrey discovers, in the last chapter, that the museums each choose one parrot from a collection of fifty, not knowing which parrot Flaubert had really borrowed.

In his search for Flaubert, Geoffrey discovers that the great author was involved with Juliet Herbert, although Ed Winterton destroyed the evidence of their affair. Geoffrey learns about the lives that Flaubert did not lead and the books that he did not write. Geoffrey dives into the criticisms of Flaubert and his faults. Through Flaubert's life and work, Geoffrey tries to make sense out of his own life.

Geoffrey's obsession with Flaubert covers his own hurt, confusion, and pain over his wife's death and his relationship with her. Ellen, his wife, had a number of affairs during their marriage and Geoffrey has conflicted feelings about her. Geoffrey tries to decide whether they were happy or unhappy in their marriage and if his wife really loved him or not. Geoffrey is also tormented by the fact that he shut off her life support, essentially killing her, even though he knows that there was no hope for her.

Told in a variety of different formats, the novel questions our assumptions about what history is and how we discover the facts of history. Virtually every chapter offers an alternate way of approaching the "facts" of history or a person, illustrating how our vision changes with the format and perspective.

Chapter 1, Flaubert's Parrot

Chapter 1, Flaubert's Parrot Summary

Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator, begins *Flaubert's Parrot* by describing Flaubert's statues. Six North Africans are playing *boules* under one permanent statue, which Geoffrey considers to be unstylish. The image of Flaubert depicted by the statue is a baggy-trousered, wary, aloof, and floppy-tied man. The statue looks toward the Cathedral and the city Flaubert despised. This statue is not the original one, which was taken away by the Germans in 1941. For many years, the pedestal on which the statue stood remained empty. Then, the Mayor of Rouen found the original plaster cast and made a second statue. Geoffrey thinks that as nothing about Flaubert has lasted beyond some papers and ideas, the statue will probably not last either.

Geoffrey begins his project with the statue. He wonders why writing makes us chase the writer, wanting to know about the person behind the words and thoughts. Geoffrey has five days to spend in Rouen so he decides to save Croisset for later, saving the best for last. Geoffrey had once thought of writing a book himself, but he was a doctor and he was married with children. He could only do one thing well and that was being a doctor. Now, his wife has died and his children have grown.

Geoffrey spends his first day wandering around Rouen. He'd come here before, in 1944, but the town had been bombed then. Next, he drives to Caen and the beaches where Geoffrey lunches at a hotel near to where friends had died in the war. Geoffrey wonders if it is possible to seize the past. On his third day, Geoffrey walks to the hospital, Hotel-Dieu, where Gustave's father had been the head surgeon. On his way Geoffrey passes avenue Gustave Flaubert, Imprimerie Flaubert, and a snack bar called Le Flaubert.

At the Hotel-Dieu, a man in a white coat greets Geoffrey and he explains that the museum is partly about Flaubert and partly about medical history. Geoffrey gets to see the room where Flaubert was born and some of his possessions. The other rooms contain old medical instruments. The joining of these two museums seems a bit strange to Geoffrey, but he remembers a cartoon of Flaubert dissecting Emma Bovary and this makes it seem less absurd somehow.

Geoffrey then, sees a bright green parrot, sitting in a small alcove. An inscription says that the parrot was borrowed by Flaubert from the Museum of Rouen and placed on his table while he was writing *Un coeur simple*. In the story, the parrot is called Loulou and is the pet of the main character, Felicite. A copy of a letter from Flaubert confirms that the parrot had been on his desk for three weeks. The stuffed parrot is in good condition, looking just like it had one hundred years ago. Geoffrey feels that the sight of the parrot helps him understand Flaubert.

On his way back to the hotel, Geoffrey picks up a copy of *Un coeur simple*. The tale is about a poor servant woman, Felicite, who is attached to a number of people including

her nephew and the mistress's children. Each of the people she loves is taken away from her or dies. The parrot, Loulou, is the creature Felicite Loves. When he dies, Felicite has him stuffed. She begins praying to the bird. Geoffrey thinks that the parrot is a prime example of the grotesque side of Flaubert. Geoffrey also thinks that we can interpret the meaning of the bird farther, although Flaubert would have objected. There are parallels between the life of Felicite and Flaubert. However, in one way she is completely different from Flaubert, she is inarticulate. Geoffrey wonders if adding Loulou's character to Felicite's character results in Flaubert's personality. Although it's not an exact match, Flaubert is present in both of his characters.

Flaubert had several encounters with parrots, including coming across a sick parrot and hearing a parrot calling over the Grand Canal imitating a gondolier. Geoffrey wonders what Flaubert had done with the bird after finishing the book. Did he put it away and forget about it? He wonders if it is wrong to see Loulou as symbolic of the word, as some critics have done.

On his last day in Rouen, Geoffrey drives to Croisset. The place looks shabby and pointless and Geoffrey thinks that Flaubert would have been much less bothered by this than his readers would be. A woman approaches and takes him in. The items on display are poorly arranged and numerous, as Flaubert preserved many fragments. Among the items is the tumbler from which Flaubert took his last drink of water before dying. As he looks, Geoffrey sees another bright green parrot and, also according to the label and the woman, it is the parrot that Flaubert had borrowed from the Museum of Rouen. Geoffrey wonders how to compare two parrots. One parrot is one full of memories and the other is an intruder. Geoffrey thinks that the second parrot seems less authentic. When he mentions the matter of authenticity to the woman, she supports her parrot and discounts the claims at the Hotel-Dieu. Geoffrey wonders if anyone really knows the answer and whether anyone cares but him. Later, at home, Geoffrey writes letters to various academics about the two parrots, hoping to find the answer.

Chapter 1, Flaubert's Parrot Analysis

Geoffrey Braithwaite is on a quest to learn more about Gustave Flaubert. Geoffrey journeys to the place where Flaubert lived and worked to discover who Flaubert was. He visits several museums in this first chapter. The first museum is where Flaubert was born and where his father worked. The museum is an odd mixture of Flaubert's artifacts and old medical instruments. In this museum, Geoffrey sees the stuffed parrot that Flaubert had on his desk while writing one of his works.

The second museum that Geoffrey visits is Flaubert's house. The house is in some disrepair and the rooms are cluttered and unorganized. Geoffrey again finds artifacts of Flaubert's life, giving him more pieces of the puzzle. But, he also finds another stuffed parrot which the museum claims is the parrot that Flaubert borrowed from the museum and had on his desk. The problem of the two parrots creates questions for Geoffrey about which stuffed parrot is *the* parrot and how one could know for certain. In part, this

brings up questions of how we really ever know the past and whether these "facts" are reality or some rendering of reality.

Although Geoffrey is the narrator, we learn very little about him. He is a doctor and his wife has died, but we do not even learn his name until later. Although we do not know it from this chapter, Felicite's tale is similar in some ways to Geoffrey's. Instead of a parrot, though, he is obsessed with Flaubert in order to escape the pain in his own life. Barnes's use of the first person narrative allows Geoffrey to talk directly to the reader, giving us not only descriptions of what he sees but also his thoughts and critiques of Flaubert's work. The chapter is made up of a description of what Geoffrey sees and includes a preliminary literary criticism of Flaubert. The first person narrative allows the reader to question Flaubert along with Geoffrey.

Chapter 2, Chronology

Chapter 2, Chronology Summary

The second chapter consists of a list of dates in Flaubert's life. There are three sections. In the first section, details of Flaubert's life and his successes are listed. In the second section, deaths and Flaubert's failures are listed. Finally, in the third section, Flaubert's thoughts are listed by date.

Some of the important dates in the first section include the successes and growth of Flaubert. In 1821, Flaubert was born and in 1825, his nurse Julie enters the household. In 1831, he enters the College de Rouen and does well. He meets Elisa Schlesinger in 1836 and around the same time, Flaubert has sex for the first time with one of his mother's maids. Flaubert's first published work appears in 1837 and, in 1844; he is confined to the family home at Croisset because of an epileptic attack. In 1846, Flaubert meets Louise Colet and begins his most celebrated affair. Between 1851 and 1857, Flaubert writes and publishes *Madame Bovary*. He publishes several more works and dies in 1880.

The dates in the second list include those associated with deaths and failures in Flaubert's life. In 1936, Flaubert begins his hopeless, obsessive passion for Elisa Schlesinger, making him incapable of ever really loving another woman. He is expelled from the College de Rouen in 1939, and, in 1943, he fails at law school. In 1944, he experiences his first epileptic attack, following which Flaubert requires treatments for the rest of his life. Gustave's father and sister die in 1846, making him the adoptive father to his nieces. In 1849, his friends tell him to throw his first literary work into the fire. Flaubert catches syphilis in 1850. His mother dies in 1872 and Louise Colet dies in 1876. In 1880, impoverished and lonely, Gustave Flaubert dies

The third list consists of Flaubert's thoughts throughout the years, all of which are expressed in metaphors. Flaubert's life is compared to a variety of things including: seaweed, a cigar, a lizard, nightlight, and an old aqueduct. He writes about his inability to love and his discontent. Flaubert feels that his life is tied to his mother and will be until one of them dies. "You had hoped to find in me a fire which scorched and blazed and illuminated everything; which shed a cheerful light, dried out damp wainscoting, made the air healthier and rekindled life. Alas! I'm only a poor nightlife, whose red wick sputters in a lake of bad oil full of water and bits of dust" (pg. 34). Flaubert thinks about the pain of his work and how he puts everything into neat little categories.

Chapter 2, Chronology Analysis

This chapter is an interesting take on the lists of dates that are usually associated with historical analysis. We find that some of the usual topics are covered in the lists: births, deaths, publication dates, etc. But, Barnes also includes with it Flaubert's thoughts. In

many ways, the first list is the expected historical list. We learn about what Flaubert did and a little about who he was. The second and particularly the third list are somewhat unexpected, showing us a different version of history.

Each list illustrates different truths about Flaubert. Each list tells us about him, but the information is very different from list to list. If someone were only to encounter the first list, a great deal of important information about Flaubert and his life would be missing. In many ways, the third list tells us much more about who Flaubert was than the other lists. The lists, then, in some ways illustrate the incompleteness of history and how we only see parts of the past most of the time.

Chapter 3, Finders Keepers

Chapter 3, Finders Keepers Summary

Biographies contain a lot of information but a lot is also missing from them. Geoffrey first meets Ed Winterton at a bookseller's fair as they both reach for a copy of Turgenev's *Literary Reminiscences*. Over tea, they talk about what led them to that book. Ed is interested in Gosse and English literary society at the turn of the century. Ed is an American academic and he likes to present himself as a failure.

Geoffrey doesn't expect to hear from Ed again. Ed writes Geoffrey to ask if Geoffrey is interested in Juliet Herbert and that he'll be in London in August, if Geoffrey wants to meet. Juliet Herbert is a hole in Flaubert's life. She was the governess to Flaubert's niece Caroline. Although Juliet and Flaubert wrote to each other no letters have survived. Almost nothing is known about her. Biographers disagree about her importance in Flaubert's life. Some argue the she was of small importance because of the absence of evidence. Other biographers use the lack of evidence as an indication that she was one of the writer's mistresses. Flaubert's one reference to her was in a letter to Bouilhet where he expresses his excitement by her.

Geoffrey wonders if Ed has discovered anything about her and he begins feeling possessive in advance, even before he knows what Ed may have found. Geoffrey thinks that perhaps the information will shed light on Flaubert's behavior in London. Flaubert made four trips to London but little is known about them.

Meeting Ed at the restaurant, Geoffrey learns that Ed has been fired from his job. Ed tells Geoffrey that Juliet Herbert had a cousin and this woman had found the letters written by Flaubert. She took them to Mr. Gosse to find their value, but he said they weren't worth anything. The letters now belonged to a woman named Kent and she had asked Ed if the letters were worth anything. He lied to her and told her that they weren't worth anything now. Ed thought he'd take them home and sell them. There are about seventy-five letters, about three dozen each from Flaubert and Juliet.

Geoffrey asks is Ed's read the letters and whether they had an affair. Ed confirms their affair and says that it had started soon after Juliet had come to Croisset. The affair between them continued while she was at Croisset and when Flaubert went to England. Ed says that they were almost engaged. Flaubert seemed to have conquered the English language and the couple seemed quite fond of each other. Geoffrey asks if Ed brought any of the letters with him, but Ed says that he burned them. In one of the last letters, Flaubert says that at his death, the letters will be sent back to her and he wants her to burn both sides. Ed says that when he read Flaubert's request, he didn't feel that he had a choice. Flaubert had also told Juliet to lie if anyone asked her about the letters or what they contained. Ed says that he's sure that Geoffrey will agree that he made the right moral decision. Geoffrey; however, is angry with him.

Chapter 3, Finders Keepers Analysis

Barnes again returns to the theme of history and biographies being necessarily incomplete. There are always details that will slip through the records or that will not be collected. Although biographers and historians do the best they can with the information available, their materials are always imperfect and incomplete. Barnes chooses to discuss the questions surrounding Juliet Herbert and what role she played in Flaubert's life. Geoffrey is interested in this, even before he knows exactly what Ed's information will be.

Ed's information adds to the knowledge about Flaubert in important ways but his destruction of the letters makes the information unusable. No one beyond the two of them will ever know about the letters or their content. Ed's actions in destroying the letters also illustrates how and why history is incomplete. While he destroyed the letters willfully, other material is lost or accidentally destroyed as the years pass.

Chapter 4, The Flaubert Bestiary

Chapter 4, The Flaubert Bestiary Summary

Flaubert is the bear and Caroline, his sister, is the rat. They each refer to themselves as these animals and Flaubert compares himself on a number of occasions to a bear. In September 1845, Flaubert refers to himself as a white bear, for example. Geoffrey wonders if this is because the white bear can not be tamed. Other bears have been used by humans, but not the white bear. The white bear is the aristocrat, aloof and distant.

But Flaubert compares himself to other animals as well. If Flaubert hadn't been the bear, Geoffrey thinks that Flaubert might have been a camel. It is both a serious and a comic comparison at the same time. Flaubert writes that he is like a camel that is very hard to get started and very had to stop. Sheep also fascinate Flaubert. He sees a five-legged sheep in 1847 and takes the owner out to dinner. A year later, he would appear to an ill Du Camp with the sheep in tow.

Parrots are also important in Flaubert's work. The first important parrot is Loulou, Felicite's parrot, which resulted in the multiple stuffed parrots at the museums. Flaubert encountered three live parrots during his life and one sick one. Caroline, in some of her writing, indicates that Felicite and her parrot really lived and that the true ancestor of Loulou may have been the Trouville parrot of Captain Barbey. Flaubert also once clipped an article out of the newspaper about a man who owned a parrot. As a young man, he had been the victim of an ill-fated love affair but now he lived with his parrot. He taught the parrot to say the name of his lost love and the parrot repeated it hundreds of times a day. The parrot took on a rare significance but then it died. The man from the story began to believe that he had turned into the parrot. Flaubert was fascinated by the story. Even before Loulou, parrots flitted through his work and his letters.

Dogs also work their way through Flaubert's life. Elisa Schlesinger had a large dog, which might have been a Newfoundland. Flaubert would take the dog for walks and sometimes kiss it where Elisa's lips had been. He would whisper to the dog what he wished to tell her Elisa. Flaubert kept a number of pets in his home at Croisset. A greyhound named Julio became his final companion. The dog and Flaubert were often ill at the same time. Madame Bovary also has a dog in the novel. In 1851, Flaubert ran across a dragoman and a policeman, who's Scottish terrier had been lost. The dragoman barked like a dog and they heard the terrier answering back. But there are at least two accounts of this story. "What happened to the truth is not recorded" (pg. 65).

Chapter 4, The Flaubert Bestiary Analysis

In this chapter, Barnes again considers the ways in which Flaubert's life influenced his literary works. Flaubert's life and art intertwined and intersected. His experiences wound

their way into his writing in many ways. For example, Flaubert's fascination with parrots may have led to their inclusion in this work. This chapter also presents various animals as symbols for Flaubert.

The chapter ends with the encounter with the policeman and the dragoman which illustrates the discrepancies that exist within memories and historical accounts. Both Du Camp and Flaubert remember the experience differently and write about their own version. Barnes notes that the real truth will never be known as the two accounts obscure the real truth.

Chapter 5, Snap!

Chapter 5, Snap! Summary

Geoffrey does not like coincidences; he prefers to feel that life is chaotic. If Geoffrey could control all of literary fiction, he would ban coincidences. Geoffrey thinks that one way authors legitimize coincidences is to call them ironies. Geoffrey isn't sure how Flaubert felt about coincidences. The man who prosecuted *Madame Bovary* was later found to have written a collection of priapic verses. In his private life Flaubert traveled in curtained cabs to avoid the lusty Louise Colet. The very devices that allowed him to avoid sexual encounters, he would use to facilitate Madame Bovary's sexuality. Geoffrey considers some of the other ironies in Flaubert's life.

In Dec. 1849, Du Camp and Flaubert climb the Great Pyramid, after sleeping beside it the night before. At the top, Flaubert notices a business card pinned in place with the name "Humbert, Frotteur" and a Rouen address. The man's name is the same as a Nabokov character who seduces young American girls. As it turns out, the card was not pinned in place by the man either. As a trick, Maxime du Camp had arranged for the card to be there for Flaubert to find. Yet, the story becomes more complicated because Flaubert had planned on pinning it in place for Du Camp but forgot and Du Camp took advantage of his memory laps to twist the trick.

Flaubert used to spend his summer holidays at Trouville where he met Gertrude and Harriet Collier, and it seems that both ladies were enamored with him. He was fonder of Gertrude than he was of Harriet. Flaubert sent Gertrude a copy of *Madame Bovary*. Gertrude married Charles Tennant and while Flaubert gained fame as a novelist, she published an edition of her grandfather's journal. Gertrude's daughter married Henry Morton Stanley, an explorer. On one of the explorer's trips to Africa, his party had to get rid of their unnecessary belongings. He ended up having to toss a copy of Flaubert's *Salammbo*, keeping only Shakespeare and the Bible.

In 1846, Flaubert's sister Caroline died. As they lowered her coffin into the hole, it got stuck. The hole had been dug too narrow for the coffin. The gravediggers tried to twist it and hack at it. Finally one of them put his foot on the coffin, right above Caroline's face, and pushed it down. At Flaubert's funeral, his coffin too got stuck. This time the grave had been dug too small lengthwise.

Chapter 5, Snap! Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator Geoffrey recounts several instances of coincidence or irony in Flaubert's life. He tells us that he hates coincidences and that he prefers to believe in the chaos and craziness of life. Yet, there are instances of coincidence in Flaubert's work and life. Were they simple happenings that had some rational explanation? Perhaps gravediggers often dug ill fitting graves because they didn't want to cut more

sod than they had to. Perhaps these instances were not seen as coincidences at the time.

Art and life intertwine again in this chapter. One example of this is the closed cabs. Flaubert uses them to hide from Louise Colet and Flaubert uses closed cabs in his fiction for Madame Bovary's sexual encounters. Later, people would begin referring to the cabs as Bovarys. There is not a clear distinction between art and life. They flow into one another and influence each other. In a similar way, Geoffrey is looking to Flaubert and his work in order to make sense of his own life.

Chapter 6, Emma Bovary's Eyes

Chapter 6, Emma Bovary's Eyes Summary

Geoffrey hates critics. Enid Starkie, a Flaubert biographer, wrote the following: "Flaubert does not build up his characters, as did Balzac, by objective, external description; in fact, so careless is he of their outward appearance that on one occasion he gives Emma brown eyes (14); on another deep black eyes (15); and on another blue eyes (16)" (pg. 74). Geoffrey thinks that at first, the irritation over something like this isn't with the critic, but with the author. Couldn't Flaubert even keep straight the eye color of his most famous character? Geoffrey had never noticed Madame Bovary's eye color in all his readings. Was he missing things that Enid Starkie knew about? Geoffrey always reads Flaubert for pleasure and Geoffrey wonders if the passionate reader is allowed to forget details like eye color while the critic is forced to become intimately familiar with the text.

Geoffrey remembers another lecture given by Christopher Ricks, a professor from Cambridge. The Professor talked about mistakes in literature and whether they matter. A number of writers made glaring mistakes at some point. Two large literary mistakes that Ricks discussed stick out for Geoffrey. The first mistake occurs in *Lord of the Flies* when Piggy's glasses are used to start a fire but because Piggy's lenses are for short sightedness the optics could not have started a fire. The second mistake Geoffrey remembers is in a Tennyson poem where Tennyson wrote about 600 men riding into battle. But the number was corrected in the press to 673. Tennyson left it as it was. The Professor made the argument was that, "if the factual side of literature becomes unreliable, then ploys such as irony and fantasy become much harder to use," (pg 77). Mistakes like those in *Lord of the Flies* are external mistakes, contradictions between what the book claims and what reality is. But the problem of Madame Bovary's eyes is an internal problem, when the author is claiming two incompatible things. These mistakes can only be explained by sloppy habits and incompetence.

Geoffrey considers whether it really matters whether Madame Bovary's eyes are blue or brown. Is this a separate issue from the writer's mistake? Does either color really matter? Geoffrey is surprised by how few mistakes writers actually make. He thinks about how Enid Starkie made her own mistake: she used a portrait on her first volume about Flaubert that was not actually Flaubert. Geoffrey reads Madame Bovary again, paying special attention to Madame Bovary's eyes. Flaubert makes six references to Madame Bovary's eyes. In those references, Flaubert describes her eyes as brown, but appearing as black or deep blue depending on the light.

Chapter 6, Emma Bovary's Eyes Analysis

Barnes returns again to a discussion of truth in this chapter. A critic comments on Flaubert's apparent discrepancies in describing Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary*. The

critic claims that Flaubert describes Bovary's eyes as three different colors in different parts in the book which creates an internal mistake, something that is incompatible within the text. Geoffrey's thinks that internal mistakes are worse than external mistakes because they show the author's sloppiness or lack of attention to the text and characters.

Through Geoffrey, we are drawn into a discussion of whether this really matters, but also the ways in which "truth" is different for different people. In the end, do the mistakes matter? How do they affect the "truth" of the novel or of real life? Which is more real, art of life? Geoffrey's again reveals the dilemmas that occur when art and life intertwine. In reality, mistakes within books probably do not matter in a person's real life, yet they create problems for the person as the art pretends to be life. For Geoffrey, this "problem" in Flaubert's work seems to be of great importance and he rereads the book to discover if the "problem" is real. Geoffrey's search may indicate that this is an area that he has some control over. He can read the text and discover whether Dr. Starkie was right or wrong. This quest replaces the areas of his life over which he has no control, like the death of his wife.

Chapter 7, Cross Channel

Chapter 7, Cross Channel Summary

Geoffrey is on the ferry crossing the channel. He likes crossing during the off-season, the in-between times. Geoffrey thinks that these months are without certainty, not quite summer or winter. It's the third time he's made the trip this year. Geoffrey likes that it's different on the French side of the Channel than it is on the English side. The light is different. Geoffrey goes to France for these small differences.

Flaubert didn't believe in progress, instead he believed that democracy made people more stupid. Geoffrey agrees with Flaubert. Geoffrey has three stories to tell: one about Flaubert, one about his wife, Ellen, and one about himself. His own story is the simplest but also the hardest to start. His wife's story is more complicated but he wants us to be prepared when he tells that story so instead, Geoffrey is telling Flaubert's story.

Flaubert wrote a Dictionary. At one level, it contains a catalogue of clichés and odd definitions but it's also a handbook of fake advice. "Study it carefully and you would never say anything wrong, while never getting anything right" (pg. 87). Within it, Flaubert applies irony on various levels. Geoffrey is tempted to write a similar book about the accepted ideas about Flaubert. Flaubert believed that style was a function of theme and arose from the work itself. Geoffrey thinks that even if we don't quite understand Flaubert or if we think him naïve or unsuccessful, we still need to respect his seriousness and his bold loneliness. Flaubert's work might be characterized as classical or modern because he was either looking back to the seventeenth century or forward to the twentieth.

Geoffrey thinks about a quote he has read stating that the author in a book must be like God, everywhere but invisible. Geoffrey thinks that this is a literary technique used by nineteenth century writers. Do we doubt contemporary authors who hesitate or profess uncertainty? When an author presents a choice about the ending of the novel, do we truly believe that there is a choice? The novel with two endings simply takes us down two paths. If novelists really wanted to reproduce life's possibilities, they would put a set of sealed envelops at the back of the novel with different endings. The reader could only choose one ending.

"How do we seize the past?" (pg. 90). Geoffrey is not sure what he should believe about the past. He wants to know if mad people were madder in the past but Geoffrey thinks that we are not allowed to use the word mad to describe lunacy anymore. Everyone uses euphemisms especially when dealing with touchy subjects like adultery. Any history of adultery, Geoffrey concludes, would have to include Madame Bovary's seduction in the cab, as it is probably the most famous nineteenth century fictional depiction. It is easy to imagine the seduction in the cab, but other writers indicate that the space inside the cab would have been more cramped and less romantic than a reader might have assumed from Flaubert's work.

Geoffrey tells us about himself. He is a widowed doctor who is over sixty with grown children. Furthermore, Geoffrey tells us that he is; inclined to melancholy, an amateur Flaubert scholar, he likes to travel, and he likes to read. Geoffrey writes this description as a personal advertisement but he thinks that people who write such advertisements are never truthful about themselves. Geoffrey was reading Mauriac's memoirs, but they aren't really his memories. Mauriac tells the reader about the books he's read, the plays he's seen, and so on. Geoffrey has brown eyes but he has not told us about Flaubert's eyes. Geoffrey thinks that nothing much about his own character matters, except that he's honest. When he was a doctor, he never killed a single patient and he didn't kill his wife. Geoffrey questions what knowledge is useful and what knowledge is true. He can either give us too much information or he can only give us a minimum and tell us that it is enough.

Geoffrey thinks that critics want to control literature so that they can regulate the past and what is written. Geoffrey decides that if he had control over what was written he'd have the following restrictions: There would be no more novels about people reverting back to nature. There would also be no novels about incest or set in abattoirs, and he would ban novels set in Oxford or Cambridge. Geoffrey would introduce a quota system for literature about South America. There could be no scenes of carnality between humans and animals and no novels about small forgotten wars in the far reaches of the British Empire. Novels could not have a narrator identified by a single letter and he would not allow novels about other novels. Geoffrey would also ban on God in literature.

The past is distant and receding. We can't know everything about the past because it would only confuse us. Directness can also be confusing. For example, knowing Geoffrey's full name has not really helped us, he thinks. Geoffrey wonders if the world progresses or if it shuffle back and forth like the ferry across the channel?

Chapter 7, Cross Channel Analysis

Barnes returns to the idea of the past and what we know about it. Geoffrey wonders how much information is needed and what is useful to know. Does his name or appearance help us know him? What facts do we need to know in order to understand him? In a sense, when Geoffrey wonders what information about himself to reveal, it illustrates the same questions of history and truth that Barnes has been asking throughout the novel. Do facts and dates reveal the past to us? How much and what information do we need to understand and know the past? How is this complicated by incomplete information?

We also learn a bit more about Geoffrey in this chapter. He reveals to the reader that he did not kill his wife, anticipating that this might be a question the reader would have after Geoffrey says his wife is dead. Yet, this anticipation also indicates that Geoffrey feels there is the possibility that someone will think he has killed his wife, perhaps indicating that something he did led to his wife's death or that others have questioned him about this. His comment foreshadows Geoffrey's revelations about his wife and their relationship later in the book. Geoffrey also reveals that his eyes are brown, yet this tells

us nothing more about him than our ignorance of what color Flaubert's eyes were. This piece of information does not reveal anything useful to the reader, which is why Barnes uses it as an example of Geoffrey's indecision about what to reveal.

Chapter 8, The Train-spotter's Guide to Flaubert

Chapter 8, The Train-spotter's Guide to Flaubert Summary

The house at Croisset was good for Flaubert. It was close to Rouen and gave him access to Paris, yet it was still isolated. The house was large enough for him to have a study but small enough to discourage visitors. His father had bought the house after Flaubert suffered his epilepsy attack and after the property at Deville had been sold so the railroad could be built across the land.

Flaubert belonged to the first railroad generation, yet he hated railroads. Flaubert felt that they were a bad form of transportation and traveling by train bored him. Flaubert also hated that the railways gave people the illusion of progress. He thought moral advances should accompany scientific advances. In Geoffrey's mind, though, the railroad plays an underestimated part in Flaubert's affair with Louise Colet. Louise Colet lived in Paris and Flaubert lived in Rouen. Flaubert wouldn't come to Paris and he wouldn't allow her to come to Rouen. So the couple would meet about midway between the cities at Mantes. The Paris to Rouen railway opened about three years before they met. Their journey to the mid point took them only a few hours each instead of a day. The railroad made the journey and thus, the affair, accessible to both of them. They met by train for the first time in 1846. Flaubert's mother was not aware of Colet and so, all of Colet's letters to Flaubert were sent through Maxime du Camp. Yet, Flaubert's mother seemed aware that something was going on and when Flaubert returned to Rouen on the train, his mother was waiting for him. Flaubert also traveled via the London Underground, although this is not well known.

Geoffrey takes the train from Rouen. On the train, he notices on the signs that English takes more words than French or German. His single ticket was 35 francs. The journey now takes less than an hour; about half of what it took in Flaubert's day. At Mantes, Geoffrey buys a newspaper and drinks some coffee. Flaubert did not include many trains in his work, as most of his work was set before the railroads descended on France. While at Croisset, Geoffrey notices that trains travel past Flaubert's pavilion as they leave the station.

Chapter 8, The Train-spotter's Guide to Flaubert Analysis

Art and life co-mingle in this chapter as Geoffrey examines Flaubert's experiences with trains. While he is analyzing Flaubert's life and work, Geoffrey is also engaging in a train ride, following Flaubert's path to Mantes. Although trains were new in Flaubert's time

and they allowed him to carry on his affair with Louise Colet, Flaubert found them boring. Geoffrey finds it sad that even though Flaubert tried to escape trains, a trail rail goes right past his house in front of the water.

For Flaubert's experiences with trains and railroads, he didn't include many in his works. This was largely because his works of fiction were set before the time when trains descended on France.

Chapter 9, The Flaubert Apocrypha

Chapter 9, The Flaubert Apocrypha Summary

Geoffrey wonders whether the books that authors don't write matter. He thinks that it's easy to assume that the apocryphal bibliography must consist of bad ideas and abandoned projects. He thinks that ideas aren't always abandoned because they fail some test. The writer has an idea and then has to gather other ideas around this; sometimes there's too much and sometimes there's too little. Geoffrey imagines that perhaps the sweetest moment of writing is having an idea about a book that never has to be written or sullied with a definite shape.

Geoffrey goes through the apocryphal bibliography, starting with autobiography. Flaubert made references to writing an autobiography but he also announces his abandonment of the idea. He translated *Candide* into English, but with Flaubert's erratic use of English, this may have added an unintended element of comedy. Flaubert then became interested in the story of Mycerinus and his sarcophagus. It later turned out that the mummified body might not be Mycerinus at all. In 1850, Flaubert announced three projects. In 1852 and 1853, he made plans for a metaphysical novel about a man happy in his dreams but unhappy in life. In 1853, he thought about a novel on chivalry. In 1861, he was "meditating" on a novel about insanity. At this point, Flaubert probably knew that each novel would take him five to seven years. His back burner projects would have to continue to simmer. In the last dozen years of his life, he had four major ideas.

All of these unwritten works tantalize Geoffrey. Yet, these ideas can still be studied and filled out or re-imagined. Geoffrey think about the unlived lives and how they are the real apocrypha. Flaubert never married or learned to dance. "Instead he learned that life is not a choice between murdering your way to the throne or slopping back in a sty; that there are swinish kings and regal hogs; that the king may envy the pig; and that the possibilities of the not-life will always change tormenting to fit the particular embarrassments of the lived life" (pg. 121). At seventeen, Flaubert wanted to live in a ruined castle by the sea. At eighteen, he thought that he was born the Emperor of Cochin-China. At nineteen, he wanted to become a Turk in Turkey or a cameleer in Egypt. At twenty-four, Flaubert thought seriously about becoming a bandit in Smyrna. He imagined a life with Louise: they would marry and have a child but then she would die, Flaubert quickly abandoned the idea of marriage. At twenty-nine, Flaubert wanted to live in South America. At thirty, he thought about the apocryphal lives of others, like Louis XIV and Nero. Flaubert confessed to Louise that many hours of his life were spent thinking about what he would do if he had an income of a million francs a year. By thirty-five, real life had begun and Flaubert's unlived life died away. He was thirty-five when *Madame Bovary* was published in book form and his fantasies were no longer needed.

Chapter 9, The Flaubert Apocrypha Analysis

History is often concerned with the events of individuals. In this chapter, Barnes turns that on its head, considering all of the things that didn't happen in Flaubert's life. Does the unlived life tell us as much about a person as the things that they actually do? How might Flaubert's life have been different had some of his thoughts come into being? Would he have written the works he did? Would unwritten works have been more successful or better than the ones he did write?

By examining what didn't happen in Flaubert's life, Barnes turns the reader to an unusual analysis. Typically, historians and scholars focus on the events that did happen in order to tell us about a person or place. Here, Barnes shows what didn't happen to help illuminate the decisions and character of Flaubert. Geoffrey's thoughts on this are interesting, if only for the fact that he is concerned with them at all. Geoffrey may also be looking back on his life and thinking about the lives that he did not lead or the things that he did not do.

Chapter 10, The Case Against

Chapter 10, The Case Against Summary

Geoffrey wonders why we want to know the worst: is it that we tire of hearing the best or are we just curious? He loved Ellen, but he wanted to know the worst about his wife. Ellen was fond of him but she only wanted to know the best about Geoffrey. He thinks that this is the real distinction between people: those who want to know everything, including the bad, and those who don't. Geoffrey feels the way same about books that he did about his wife; he wants to know everything about the authors. But there is a difference for him between lovers and authors. With lovers, he thinks that we are relieved to find out the worst. With an author, we have a tendency to defend them so we can continue believing the best about them.

Geoffrey thinks about what other people would say Flaubert's faults are and how he would defend them. People might say that Flaubert hated humanity, but Geoffrey thinks that Flaubert did love some people. Even if he did hate some humanity, Geoffrey wonders if Flaubert can be blamed for it. Flaubert hated democracy. Geoffrey thinks that Flaubert thought democracy was just a stage in the history of government and that it was arrogant to think that our system was the best. People might say that he wasn't interested enough in politics. Yet, Geoffrey argues that Flaubert was interested, just not to the degree that some would have liked him to be. Geoffrey thinks that people criticize Flaubert because he; disliked the Commune, was unpatriotic, shoot wild life in the desert, taught no positive values, was a sadist, acted terribly toward women, believed in beauty, obsessed over style, didn't believe that Art has a social purpose. Geoffrey defends Flaubert on each of these points.

Chapter 10, The Case Against Analysis

Turning the biography on its head once more, Barnes addresses some of the faults that people have found in Flaubert. Instead of focusing exclusively on the positives of Flaubert's achievements, Barnes devotes a chapter to Flaubert's faults and things he has been criticized for. Flaubert is exposed to us and then defended by Geoffrey. Through this process, we learn about Flaubert and a great deal about Geoffrey. Geoffrey prefers to know both the good and the bad about people, including Flaubert and his wife, Ellen. This will help explain his reactions and behavior when he reveals more about his wife later in the book. Geoffrey alludes to the idea that there was something negative about his wife, but he also seems to have accepted whatever it was.

It is also clearer from this chapter why Geoffrey tries to find out as much information as he can about Flaubert, including the negative things. He is driven to understand as much as he can about people, especially Flaubert. Geoffrey needs to know both the positive and the negative. The hint at something negative about his late wife suggests

that this obsession with Flaubert is, at least in part, an attempt to escape the reality of his life and its pain. If he can escape into Flaubert, into art, then the pain in his life will fade.

Chapter 11, Louise Colet's Version

Chapter 11, Louise Colet's Version Summary

Louise Colet tells her story in this chapter. She didn't need Flaubert in her life; she was thirty-five, beautiful, and famous. They met at Pradier's, where she was to sit for the artist. Flaubert was twenty-four and even if she had been looking for a lover, Louise would not have chosen him. But she wasn't looking and she didn't really choose. She was chosen by love. Flaubert was an eager lover, although it was never easy to persuade him to meet her. There was harmony between them. Flaubert was not shy and not narrow in his tastes.

Louise was a complication in Flaubert life in ways that prostitutes were not. She meant the risk of partnership and equality and Flaubert could not risk such things. Flaubert sometimes sent her flowers. Once he sent her a rose from Croisset.

Louise went to Croisset to see after he broke off their affair, wanting to confront him about dismissing her love. She came into sight of a white house but Flaubert refused to give her entrance. Flaubert would not see her at his house but he agreed to meet her at her hotel. Because Flaubert traveled there by steamer, he arrived at the hotel before Lousie. Flaubert told her to marry Victor Cousin and she fled to England. Louise doubted that he understood women at all. Flaubert had humiliated her. She had to send her letters to him through Du Camp. Flaubert lied to her, spoke ill of her to all his friends, and ridiculed her work. Louise thinks that the qualities in her that attracted Flaubert had come to irritate him and this led to his humiliation of her. He feared her because she understood him and because he feared himself.

Louise thinks that what Flaubert wanted most from her was an intellectual partnership. He wanted an affair of the mind. But having an affair of the mind is no easier than an affair of the heart. "He was rough, awkward, bullying and haughty; then he was tender, sentimental, enthusiastic and devoted. He didn't know the rules," (pg. 148). Louise knew that Flaubert was a genius but he undervalued her talents. Flaubert wanted her to write like him because he believed that his way was best. But Flaubert's vanity was more than literary; he also believed that others should live like him. Flaubert would have made her into a hermit if he had his way. Louise thinks that when they are dead that people will take his side and cast her as the woman who took him away from his writing.

Chapter 11, Louise Colet's Version Analysis

The narrator in this chapter changes to Louise Colet. It is her voice and her thoughts about Flaubert that dominate the chapter. We see yet another angle of Flaubert. In previous chapters, Barnes has written about the lives that Flaubert did not lead and the negative parts of his life. Here, he imagines what a contemporary of Flaubert would

have said about him. Louise Colet intimately knew Flaubert. Through her, Barnes looks at who Flaubert was and what he was like to her.

Although Louise loves Flaubert, she is not blind to his faults. She realizes how badly he treats her by humiliating her and putting her down. Louise also thinks that people will take Flaubert's side after their deaths. In part, she thinks this will be due to Flaubert's fame. People will believe the best in him because of who he is and what he has written, without bothering to find out more information about their relationship. In some ways, her words continue the discussion that Geoffrey started in the previous chapter about Flaubert's faults.

Chapter 12, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas

Chapter 12, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas Summary

In this chapter, Geoffrey goes through the people, places, and things that are connected to Flaubert and gives them a definition. In some cases, as with Louise Colet, Geoffrey provides conflicting accounts of the people in Flaubert's life. Is Louise a promiscuous woman who tried to lure him into marriage or a misunderstood woman who has been crucified for her love for Flaubert? Geoffrey offers both options.

There is one definition per letter of the alphabet. The "terms" include Achille, Bouilhet, Colet, Du Camp, Epilepsy, Flaubert, Goncourts, Herbert, Irony, Jean-Paul Sartre, Kuckuk Hanem, Letters, Mme Flaubert, Normandy, Orient, Prussians, Quixote, Realism, Sand, Transvestism, Usa, Voltaire, Whores, Xylophone, Yvetot, and Zola. Geoffrey gives a brief account of each person, place, or thing and its relationship to Flaubert.

Chapter 12, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas Analysis

In this chapter we see Flaubert's life expressed as a dictionary. The people, places, and things that intersect with his life are defined and discussed explicitly. This is yet another way of conceptualizing and illuminating Flaubert's life, again in an unexpected way. We don't often think of analyzing someone's life through dictionary like entries, but Barnes presents the facts about Flaubert using this unusual format.

Given the other chapters and discussions of Flaubert, this chapter stands out as Barnes's attempt to give us an "objective" view of Flaubert. We see again how history and the past change when only some things are included. We see in these entries no emotion, no motives, and none of Flaubert's thought. The entries are kept simple and short so they seem to be objective descriptions. But we know from previous chapters how much information the entries miss or obscure. The entries are true, but they are also incomplete.

Chapter 13, Pure Story

Chapter 13, Pure Story Summary

When Ellen died, Geoffrey was at first not surprised, as part of love is preparing for death. Afterward, he was overcome by madness and loneliness. He thinks that mourning is full of time. He's tried drinking and working, but there is always time. Other people think that he wishes to talk and sometimes he does but others times he does not. Geoffrey thinks about Ellen every day. She was born in 1920; they married in 1940 and had two children in 1942 and 1946. In 1976, Ellen died.

Ellen was small, but moved awkwardly, running into things and tripping. She was an only child. Geoffrey loved her, they were happy, and he misses her. Ellen didn't love him, they were unhappy, and he misses her. Perhaps her concept of love was different. She had, what Geoffrey admits, were lovers. At first he was hurt that his wife went to bed with other men. But Ellen was nice to him and she was a good wife. Ellen seemed untouched by it all and she only lied about her secret life, in everything else she was truthful to him.

Ellen stopped taking lovers when they had their children and she started again when the children went to school. Sometimes, people tried to take Geoffrey aside and tell him about the affairs. Geoffrey wonders why they thought he wanted to know or that he didn't already know about them already. "We were happy; we were unhappy; we were happy enough" (pg. 165). Geoffrey and his wife never talked about her secret life. Ellen's despair and her affairs seem to Geoffrey to come from the same chamber of her heart which was inaccessible to him.

Geoffrey thinks that there is room for improvement in life. The only good thing now is death. The deaths of writers like Flaubert aren't special, but they are described in detail. Ellen laid in a stable, but hopeless, condition when Geoffrey made the decision to cut her life support. Geoffrey thinks that she would have wanted him to do it. Yet, in his way, Geoffrey feels that he killed her because he shut off the life support and she died. Geoffrey feels that he understands Ellen less than he understands Flaubert, a foreign writer who has been dead for over a hundred years.

Chapter 13, Pure Story Analysis

We learn more about Ellen in this chapter and her relationship with Geoffrey. She had a series of lovers throughout their marriage and Geoffrey was aware of them. Geoffrey was hurt in the beginning by this, but gradually, he came to accept her actions. Geoffrey states that she was a good wife to him otherwise and that he loved her. This chapter, in some ways, serves as a climax for the book. There have been hints about this, but now the truth about Geoffrey and his relationship with his wife have been revealed. Although

he has talked greatly about Flaubert, underneath it all is this truth, this relationship, this pain. Flaubert's story is merely a cover for it for Geoffrey's story.

Towards the end of the chapter, Geoffrey states that he understands Flaubert more than he understood his wife. This is somewhat surprising as he was married to Ellen and lived with her for a long time. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that he doesn't really understand her motives for having affairs during their marriage or her despair. Flaubert is accessible to Geoffrey because he can read Flaubert's thoughts and writings. As Flaubert dead, Flaubert can't surprise Geoffrey with the unexpected. Geoffrey will not think that he might understand Flaubert only to have Flaubert do something that defies explanation. Ellen, by contrast, often did this. As Geoffrey knew her and lived with her, he was in some ways at the mercy of her actions and inconsistencies. Ellen was not nicely laid out in writing for Geoffrey. He couldn't read her thoughts on a piece of paper or see the world through her eyes in the same way that he can with Flaubert. Even if Geoffrey isn't correct in his assessments, Flaubert couldn't contradict him.

Chapter 14, Examination Paper

Chapter 14, Examination Paper Summary

This chapter presents a final examination about Flaubert. It includes questions on literary criticism, economics, geography, logic, biography, psychology, psychoanalysis, philately, phonetics, theatrical history, and history. Each question is somehow related to Flaubert's life or works and each question is posed in an essay or short answer format. For example, in the biography section, the question states that Maxime du Camp wrote an epitaph for Louise Colet which said, "She who lies here compromised Victor Cousin, ridiculed Alfred de Musset, reviled Gustave Flaubert, and tried to assassinate Alphonse Karr" (pg. 176). The question asks who comes out better: Louise Colet or Maxime du Camp. The questions include little tidbits about Flaubert and those around him, including the information that Flaubert was on a French Stamp in 1952, and that Eleanor Marx and Emma Bovary were remarkably similar.

Chapter 14, Examination Paper Analysis

The final examination in this chapter operates at several levels. On one level, it is simply an example of a test that might be given to a student studying Flaubert. On another level, it is a test that Geoffrey, the narrator of the novel, gives to the reader. As he has been teaching the reader about Flaubert throughout the novel, the test allows the reader to judge what she or he has learned about Flaubert along the way. Yet, as the "test" includes all new information on Flaubert, it is essentially another set of information for the reader about Flaubert. On another level, it is a test for Geoffrey himself. As he has been on a quest to learn about Flaubert, has he learned enough to articulate his knowledge in an academic manner? On another level, the test serves as another reminder of the pitfalls of history. Can a test fully explore the reaches of a person's life? The test, like the dictionary terms, turns Flaubert's life into an emotionless set of information. And yet, the test makes us fill in the blanks and imagine what is not readily apparent about his life.

The examination also serves as a signal that the book is ending. The reader has traveled with Geoffrey in his quest for knowledge about Flaubert and the test represents a quantifiable ending to that journey. The reader and Geoffrey have learned certain things about Flaubert and his life, yet, as Geoffrey indicates through the new information, there is still much to learn. Flaubert, like Ellen and like other individuals, is complex and complicated.

Chapter 15, And the Parrot...

Chapter 15, And the Parrot... Summary

It takes Geoffrey almost two years to solve the mystery of the two parrots. The letters he wrote after he returned from Rouen gave him no useful information and some weren't even answered. Geoffrey thinks that the people he wrote to probably thought him a crank or senile. He thinks about how when older people commit suicide they are thought to have a softening of the brain but when younger people do, it's an act of courage and social revolt. While on the topic of suicide, Geoffrey refutes the idea that Flaubert committed suicide. A man named Edmond Ledoux spread the rumor that Flaubert killed himself. Geoffrey thinks this runs counter to Flaubert's personality and that Ledoux's account of Flaubert's suicide is absurd. Ledoux argued that Flaubert hanged himself in the bath. But, Geoffrey argues, the doctor found him dying in his study so he couldn't have hung himself in the bath.

Someone gives Geoffrey the name of M. Lucien Andrieu and Geoffrey goes on a summer trip to Rouen to talk to him. Geoffrey returns to the Hotel-Dieu and takes a photo of the parrot. The docent shows him a round stamp on the perch and a record of the loans to Flaubert. The register shows that Flaubert returned every item given to him, including the parrot. Geoffrey is disappointed because he had assumed that the parrot at Croisset was the real one, although he's not sure why he favored it. Geoffrey then goes to Croisset and photographs the other parrot.

After lunch, Geoffrey goes to Flaubert's grave which is small and unpretentious. Geoffrey takes out the description of the parrot in *Un coeur simple* and reads that the parrot was green, with pink on the tips of the wings, a blue forehead, and a golden throat. He compares the photographs. Both have green bodies; both have pink wings (although the Hotel-Dieu parrot has more.) But only the Hotel-Dieu parrot has a blue forehead and golden throat. The Croisset parrot had a golden forehead and a bluish-green throat. Geoffrey thinks that he has learned the truth, but he calls M. Lucien Andrieu anyway and explains his interest in the parrots. Andrieu invites him over the following day.

Monsieur Andrieu greets him and introduces himself as the secretary and oldest member of the Societe des Amis de Flaubert. Andrieu tells Geoffrey that they set up the museum at Croisset in 1905 and gathered all the materials they could find. The curator wanted to have Flaubert's parrot, Loulou, and requested it from the Museum of Natural History. The Museum agreed to the curators request and took the curator to the reserve collection. In front of the curator were fifty parrots. The curator took the description of the parrot from Flaubert's writing and tried to pick the one that most closely matched it. Forty years later, when they were putting together the collection at Hotel-Dieu, they asked for Flaubert's parrot and were given the same choice.

Geoffrey thinks and says that the parrot at Croisset must be the correct one since they had first choice. Andrieu reminds him that Flaubert wrote from his imagination and that it wouldn't have been surprising if he had changed some of the details from the parrot he had borrowed. Stuffed animals also get moth and fall apart, perhaps changing color over time. Geoffrey realizes that either parrot could be the correct one or neither of them could be. Andrieu tells him that the museum had sold off a number of the remaining parrots.

Geoffrey realizes that it is time to pay his farewells. He goes to each of Flaubert's statues in the city. Afterward, he goes to the Museum of Natural History and is taken upstairs to see the remaining parrots. Although there are many birds, there are only three parrots. Flaubert's parrot could be one of them.

Chapter 15, And the Parrot... Analysis

This chapter acts much like an epilogue after the last chapter featuring the final examination. The chapter ties up some loose ends and features Geoffrey saying goodbye to Flaubert. Geoffrey, after two years, finally learns of a man who might be able to tell him the truth about the two parrots so he travels to Rouen. As Geoffrey looks at the two parrots himself, he thinks that the Hotel-Dieu parrot must be the parrot that Flaubert had and he is somewhat saddened by this, perhaps wanting to imagine the parrot in Flaubert's possession at Croisset eternally.

Geoffrey finally talks to a man who tells him that both museums simply chose a parrot from a room full of stuffed parrots at the Museum of Natural History. Either one of the parrots might be the right one or neither of them could be. No one will ever know for sure. Geoffrey goes to look at the remaining three parrots in the collection and imagines that one of them might be Flaubert's parrot. Through this search, Barnes continues the theme of that history is incomplete. Some things are lost or obscured by time. Flaubert's parrot will never be fully revealed because no records were kept as to which parrot was loaned to him. Yet, in the end, perhaps the mystery is more alluring to Geoffrey than an absolute truth.

Characters

Geoffrey Braithwaite

Geoffrey is the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*. He is on a quest to find more about Gustave Flaubert. The novel is about his search for Flaubert, the truth about the two stuffed parrots, and himself. He is over sixty, and is a widowed doctor with two children. Geoffrey is an amateur Flaubert scholar. He has brown eyes and gray hair and is six feet one inches tall. Geoffrey lives in Essex, England, has been in the military, and drinks whiskey on occasion.

During the novel, he meets visits Rouen to go to the Flaubert museums, meets with Ed Winterton and finds out about Flaubert's affair with Juliet Herbert. Geoffrey then tries to track down the parrot that Flaubert borrowed from the Museum of Natural History. Geoffrey tells us that as a doctor, he didn't kill a single patient and that people trusted him. Geoffrey then talks about how his wife died in the hospital. Geoffrey had to make the decision to turn off her life support and deep down, he feels like he did kill her. He is conflicted by his relationship with Ellen. Although he loved her, Ellen broke their marriage vows and had affairs with many men. Geoffrey can't quite decide if their marriage was good or bad, happy or unhappy.

Geoffrey appears to be a thoughtful, somewhat lost, person. He is interested in Flaubert and Geoffrey wants to find out as much as he can about him. Yet, Geoffrey also gives the reader the impression that he is on his Flaubert quest, at least in part, to keep him from having to deal with his wife's death and the problems in their marriage. Geoffrey seems to be conflicted and confused about their marriage and Ellen's death. Searching for Flaubert, and trying to understand him, helps Geoffrey to escape from the confusion that he feels about Ellen. Art for him is less painful than life.

Gustave Flaubert

Flaubert is a nineteenth century French writer, famous for his work *Madame Bovary*. He lived in the French town of Rouen during his adult life, although he traveled to exotic places. Born in 1821 to a surgeon father, Flaubert was a delicate child and he was not expected to live long. Flaubert was around six feet tall with gray eyes. As an adult he suffered from epilepsy attacks and syphilis. Flaubert had a number of affairs, including one with Louise Colet, but never married. By his death in 1880, Flaubert was alone and impoverished.

Geoffrey embarks on a quest to learn more about Flaubert. Flaubert appears as a romantically stunted, lonely individual. Although he maintains close friendships with other writers, Flaubert seems to hold everyone at arm's length. In 1846, Flaubert writes, "Deep within me there is a radical, intimate, bitter and incessant *boredom* which prevents me from enjoying anything and which smothers my soul," (pg. 33). Flaubert

entertained many goals and dreams as a child and young adult but he abandoned them as he aged. To his lover Louise, he was at times cruel and heartless.

Flaubert also comes across in the book as arrogant, critiquing the work of others as less important and well done as his own. Flaubert believed that the way he lived life, as a hermit, was the best way to live and tried to convince others to follow him. Louise comments that she believes, that Flaubert thought that everyone should write as much like him as possible. Although Du Camp says that Flaubert had no poetry in him, he used to lecture those around him on the subject.

Louise Colet

Louise is the woman with whom Flaubert has his most celebrated affair. She was a poet and had translated Shakespeare. She was married but had a number of affairs during her life, including the one with Flaubert and with Victor Cousin. She met Flaubert at Pradier's where she was modeling for the artist. She was thirty-five at the time and Flaubert was twenty-four.

In the chapter written from her perspective, Louise appears to be a woman deeply in love with a man who scorns her and tries to push her away. Despite Flaubert's behavior toward her, Louise tries to continue a relationship with him. Louise seems to resent Flaubert's behavior and love the idea of him. She seems to accept his faults, wanting to change him. Louise says that she is allowed to be harsh about him because she loved him. She thinks that people will take Flaubert's side of things when they are both dead.

The other version of Louise, which Geoffrey seems to share, is that she is a pest, trailing after Flaubert, trying to make him love her. She appears, in this version, to be trying to trap Flaubert into marriage and a family, although she is already married.

Ellen Braithwaite

Ellen was born in 1920 and was an only child. She married Geoffrey in 1940. They had two children together. She died in 1975, after Geoffrey disconnected her life support. Ellen was just over five feet tall, but she moved awkwardly, tripping and falling over things. Geoffrey states that Ellen was not a sensible woman.

During their marriage, Ellen had a number of affairs although she was always "nice" to Geoffrey. She only lied to Geoffrey about the affairs, but was truthful about everything else. Ellen stopped having affairs when the children were born but started again when they went to school. Geoffrey thinks that she was a good wife to him.

Maxime du Camp

Du Camp was a friend of Flaubert and they often traveled together. In 1849, when they were in Egypt to see the Great Pyramid of Cheops, Du Camps climbed up the pyramid

first. When Flaubert arrived, he found a business card of "Humbert, Frotteur" with a Rouen address. Later, it is revealed that Du Camp placed the card on the pyramid as a joke on Flaubert.

Du Camp also acted as an accessory for Flaubert's affair with Louise Colet. Louise's letters to Flaubert were sent first to Du Camp and then he forwarded them on to Flaubert, in an attempt to conceal the affair from Flaubert's mother.

Elisa Schlesinger

Elisa was the wife of a German music publisher. Flaubert met her in 1836 and he felt a great passion for her, but she did not return it. Elisa treated him kindly and the two remained in touch for forty years. She was beautiful and had a large Newfoundland dog that went everywhere with her.

Juliet Herbert

Juliet was the governess to Flaubert's niece, Caroline. There has been much speculation about whether she and Flaubert were involved or not but very little is known about her. Ed Winterton tells Geoffrey that he came into possession of some letters, which he later destroyed, that proved Juliet and Flaubert were lovers. Flaubert went to England to visit her and they wrote a number of letters back and forth to each other.

Ed Winterton

Ed is an American academic who Geoffrey meets at a booksellers' fair. Ed later comes into possession of some letters written by Flaubert and Juliet Herbert. Ed tells Geoffrey that the letters confirm that Flaubert and Juliet were involved. But, Ed also says that Flaubert wrote in his last letter that he wanted the letters burned and Ed felt that he needed to carry out Flaubert's wishes so he destroyed the letters.

Dr. Enid Starkie

Dr. Starkie is a Reader Emeritus at Oxford in French literature and she is the most exhaustive British biographer of Flaubert. Dr. Starkie criticizes Flaubert, saying that in *Madame Bovary*, he gave the main character a different eye color three times. Geoffrey disagrees with her on this.

M. Lucien Andrieu

Monsieur Andrieu is the secretary and oldest surviving member of the Societe des Amis de Flaubert. He tells Geoffrey about how two different parrots came to be listed as Flaubert's parrot in two different museums. The curators of the museums had gone to

the Museum of Natural History and had been given a choice of fifty parrots, any of which could have been the one that Flaubert borrowed.

Objects/Places

Croisset

Croisset was Flaubert's home in Rouen. It is a long, white property on the banks of the Seine. The house is now a museum about Flaubert and it contains one of the parrots.

Rouen

Rouen is the French town that Flaubert lived in. Geoffrey visits it several times during his search for Flaubert.

Hotel-Dieu

The Hotel-Dieu is the hospital where Gustave's father was a surgeon. The hospital is now a museum, with one part devoted to Flaubert and the other to medical instruments. The museum owns one of the stuffed parrots said to be the model for Loulou.

Loulou

Loulou was Felicite's parrot in *Un coeur simple*. Flaubert borrowed a stuffed parrot from the Museum of Natural History to sit on his desk while he was writing the novel. Geoffrey is now on a search to determine which parrot is the real Loulou from the two that are on display at the museums in Rouen. Loulou was said to be bright green with pink tipped wings, a golden throat, and a blue head.

The Museum of Natural History

The museum lent Flaubert a stuffed parrot while he was writing *Un coeur simple*. When the Croisset and Hotel-Dieu museums were being set up, curators chose a stuffed parrot from the museum's collection of fifty parrots as the "real" Loulou.

Mantes

Mantes was the town where Flaubert would meet Louise Colet to carry on their affair. As he wouldn't travel to Paris to her and wouldn't allow her to come to Croisset, they would each take the railroad, meeting at the midpoint which was Mantes.

Social Sensitivity

Though certainly concerned with social issues of the time, the concerns of Flaubert's Parrot affect relatively few people. Rather than worry about issues of race, ethnicity, gender or class division, Barnes, with a flamboyance which betrays a faith in Oscar Wilde's aphorism about art being useless, considers various ethical issues pertaining to the related (but not synonymous) tasks of reading and literary criticism. What, Barnes asks in various ways, should be the relationship between a reader and his or her favorite author, or a critic and his or her favorite victim?

Flaubert's Parrot chronicles an amateur scholar's attempt to solve mysteries about his favorite author, nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert. Geoffrey Braithwaite, a doctor by trade, tries to answer an innocuous question: Which of two stuffed parrots actually sat on Flaubert's desk while he composed a story in which a parrot played a crucial role? In the course of answering this question (or not answering it), he encounters other professional scholars who variously pay Flaubert too much and too little respect. Barnes suggests that either task causes problems for the casual reader.

One social concern Flaubert's Parrot explores is the capacity of literary criticism to destroy the beauty of a work in its attempt to expand the public's understanding of it.

Chapter VI opens with the rather ominous sentence, "Let me tell you why I hate critics." The narrator's ire toward academicians is focused narrowly on a single woman, Dr.

Enid Starkie. Braithwaite is flabbergasted by her claim that Flaubert was inconsistent in describing the eyes of Madame Bovary's protagonist. Starkie claims that they are variously described as brown, black and blue. Braithwaite counters her assertion with the observation that this variation is Flaubert's point; Emma Bovary's eyes had the mesmerizing quality of shifting color as the men who gazed at her changed their vantage points. Dr. Starkie has, in Braithwaite's opinion, committed the sin of becoming too close to her subject. Casual readers, he asserts, are able to forget an author's small errors and inconsistencies and maintain their admiration for the overall quality of the author's work. Professional scholarship, Barnes suggests, perverts the relationship between reader and writer, creating a mercenary exchange instead of one based on a mutual love of literature.

Perhaps the social concern that garners the greatest share of attention is the inabil ity of scholarship to ever fully document a life or solve a literary mystery. The problem, Barnes suggests, is not that individual researchers like Dr. Starkie will make mistakes, but that research into an author's life will, invariably, lead the scholar astray.

This, clearly, is not a social concern of the same urgency as the failure of ethnic groups to reconcile differences and live in peace, but, to the lover of literature, it is significant. How, Barnes' narrator wonders, can so many men and women make a living from the study of an author's life and still fail to answer important questions? Barnes

demonstrates this failure in part by giving multiple accounts of Flaubert's life—each valid but contradictory. Chapter II, for example, contains three chronologies of Flaubert's life, each from his birth in 1821 to his death in 1880. The first could be called the official version, presenting the man's accomplishments without calling attention to his embarrassments. The second is the inverse of the first, citing the same years but recounting only deaths, failures, and transgressions. The third consists wholly of Flaubert's own words: diary entries, letters, etc. Though attempting, by moving from different vantage points, to come closer to the author, this experiment only highlights the failure of any chronology, biography, or critical work to capture the complete artist.

Each version seems to claim objective truth, but in juxtaposition with the other two, each seems inadequate.

What Barnes seems to advocate is the kind of research done by his narrator.

Braithwaite never ceases to wear his heart on his sleeve. His love for Flaubert's work is ever-present; his desire to see the author in the best light, though often overwhelmed by the enormity of his subject's callousness, is never denied. Furthermore, Braithwaite uses his journey into Flaubert's life as an opportunity for telling the story of his own life. It seems as though Barnes suggests that a scholar's life will invariably emerge in 156 any assessment of an artist. The narrator of Flaubert's Parrot, at least, does not attempt to deny this fact.

Techniques

Barnes' most useful technique for making Flaubert's Parrot a success is his blending of scholarly and entertaining elements.

The novel is alternately funny, sad, and encyclopedic. Long discussions of Flaubert's body of work and literary connections are relieved by Braithwaite's sad confessions regarding his wife and his hilarious tendency to poke fun at academics, his countrymen and himself.

Barnes' brand of humor is rather unorthodox. The humor in Flaubert's Parrot is closer to Thomas Pynchon's than to humorist Dave Barry's. Barnes demands of his reader a substantial understanding and knowledge of literary history. More specifically, Barnes' ideal reader is one with a love of French literature who understands the nuances in his discussion of Flaubert's life and foils.

Barnes clearly knows the annals of French literature. His ability to weave his clearly extensive research of Flaubert's life and work into the narrative is one of his most important talents. Flaubert's Parrot reads like fiction but educates as exceptional literary history. Flaubert's travels with du Camp, his relationship to the realists who followed in his wake, and the triumphs and tribulations of his personal life are all recorded in fine detail. Significantly, though, these biographical scraps of information are not catalogued, not related in a dry, academic manner. Instead they are sprinkled through the text, constantly teasing the reader with trivia, inviting deeper research.

Themes

Art and Life

Within *Flaubert's Parrot*, art and life almost becomes characters. These aspects intertwine and diverge, both seeming real and fictional at the same time. Barnes writes near the end of the novel, "For some, Life is rich and creamy, made according to an old peasant recipe from nothing but natural products, while Art is a pallid commercial confection, consisting mainly of artificial colourings and flavourings. For others, Art is the truer thing, full, bustling and emotionally satisfying, while Life is worse that the poorest novel: devoid of narrative, peopled by bores and rouges, short on wit, long on unpleasant incidents, and leading to a painfully predictable denouement" (pg. 171). He also mentions a quote that indicates that some people think is all they should concern themselves with, while others prefer to read. Art imitated life in Flaubert's works and his life imitated art.

Flaubert seems most alive through his art, while his life was complicated and lonely. He says that fiction moves him emotionally, while events in his real life that should move him don't. Flaubert believes that everything invented in the mind of the writer is true in reality and he believes that what happens in life will find its way into art. Flaubert wonders if events in life happen to become part of art. The closed cab is one example in the novel of this relationship between art and life. Flaubert rode in closed cabs to hide from Louise Colet and he then used the closed cab for Madame Bovary's sexual escapades. After the books publication, closed cabs that were hired for sexual purposes became known as Bovarys.

Geoffrey also struggles with his relationships. Geoffrey is unsure of whether art or life is more real to him. Flaubert represents art to him; his wife represents life. At one point in the novel, Geoffrey states that he feels that he knows Flaubert better than he knew his own wife. Flaubert influences his life in ways that Ellen did not, and his life comes to mirror in Flaubert's life in many ways. Geoffrey travels in Flaubert's footsteps, stands where he stood, and immerses himself in Flaubert's writing. Flaubert has become his life, his quest and Flaubert therefore becomes more real to him and of more concern than his real life. Geoffrey uses Flaubert's life and works to make sense of his own life.

Art and life constantly intermingle and play off one another. Which is more real? They influence each other as the characters' art and lives intersect and mirror each other.

The Past

Geoffrey Braithwaite is on a quest to learn about Flaubert and his life. He looks back into the past and analyzes it. In the novel, Barnes problematizes this quest and illustrates the incompleteness of "history" as Geoffrey contemplates the aspects of Flaubert's life in unusual ways. Facts are sometimes unverifiable and they sometimes

take on different meanings as the direction of view changes. Barnes writes, "The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern rail there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at a given distance. If the boat is becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity: scurrying from one telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting from the blur to clear in another," (pg. 101).

One way that Barnes illustrates these differing views of the past is through his various chapter formats. Through these formats the author illustrates how the perception of the past and its facts shift depending on how a person views them. Is Louise Colet trying to trap Flaubert or is she simply in love with him? In the second chapter, Barnes illustrates how individuals can be reduced to their successes or their failures. If one aspect was all a person knew about an event, or person, in the past, many other aspects would be missed. Although we assume that facts are true and unobscured, they are always incomplete and hidden because the information we have is necessarily incomplete.

The search for truth in the past is expressed by Geoffrey Braithwaite in several ways. To begin with Geoffrey searches for the real story and evidence about the two parrots. Geoffrey is agitated by the presence of the two stuffed birds, as he believes that only one of them can be the "right" parrot, the one that Flaubert had on his desk. He searches tirelessly for the answer, wanting to know the truth about the parrots. In the process, Geoffrey learns that either or neither of the parrots is certain to be the right one, as the curators from both museums chose parrots from the Museum of Natural History's collection of fifty parrots. Geoffrey also indicates that he would rather know everything than be left in the dark. He wants to know the truth about his wife's affairs and about the criticisms that can be made against Flaubert. Geoffrey is someone who wants to know the good and the bad about people. Yet, knowing the truth is painful for him. In the end though, does the truth really matter and can we really know it? As Barnes shows with his discussion of the past, some things that we might accept as fact may not be. Our knowledge of the past is always incomplete and distorted. Yet, Geoffrey's knowledge of the stuffed parrots doesn't change much. Similarly, Louise Colet remains a shadowy figure with unclear motives in Flaubert's life. The truth is still obscured. The question of whether Geoffrey's knowledge of the truth changes anything remains unanswered.

Love and Grief

Flaubert's Parrot also deals with relationships and grief. In many ways, Geoffrey is trying to avoid his own grief and pain over Ellen's death by creating an obsession with Flaubert. Geoffrey says that he feels he knows Flaubert better than Ellen, but it is also the case that examining Flaubert is safer than examining his relationship with Ellen. He can not express his grief for her because of the complications in their relationship. Her affairs and his knowledge of them created a wedge between them and Geoffrey can not decide if they were happy or unhappy in their relationship. Geoffrey's not even entirely sure if she loved him.

Because of this ambivalence, Geoffrey is unable to express his grief over Ellen. Flaubert expresses a similar problem when his sister Caroline dies. Flaubert also shuts himself off from love after Elisa Schlesinger rejects him. He throws himself into his work, but keeps everyone else at an arm's length, including Louise Colet, who loves him. Flaubert's writing became safer and more real to him than his life.

Both Geoffrey and Flaubert turn their grief into something else. Flaubert almost turns himself into a hermit and dies lonely. He concentrates on his writing and it becomes more real for him in many ways than his own life. Geoffrey turns his grief into his quest for information about Flaubert.

The most pervasive theme of Flaubert's Parrot is the nature of love, whether for a book, an author, or a spouse. The narrator, Braithwaite, simultaneously loves all three.

Barnes, through Braithwaite, explores how unreciprocated love affects the lover and his view of the beloved. There are profound psychological consequences, in the world of Barnes' novel, for adoring anyone or anything that cannot return such affection.

Obviously, any one who would dedicate the time to amateur literary scholarship that Braithwaite does must be deeply enamored of his subject. The retired doctor makes many trips across the English Channel to root around in Flaubert's hometown, to revisit his haunts, hoping for some new insight. Love of an author and his books becomes, for Braithwaite, akin to obsession.

It seems as though once committed to the task of finding out more about this intriguing French novelist, Braithwaite is unable to stop. He remarks, "if you love a writer, if you depend upon the drip-feed of his intelligence, if you want to pursue him and find him—despite edicts to the contrary— then it's impossible to know too much. You seek the vice as well." Love for an author works in a way similar to the cliched notion of romantic love; it accepts completely, good and ill. Braithwaite, it seems, is in love with Flaubert the author. Whatever he may have been in person, whatever ill-treatment he may have doled out to his friends and lovers, Braithwaite can see only the beauty of his writing. He defends the long-dead novelist at every turn. In Chapter X, for example, he lists all of Flaubert's most commonly cited faults, then tirelessly defends him on every count. His defenses are sometimes impassioned, sometimes ludicrous: "3 That he didn't believe in progress. I cite the twentieth century in his defence."

This unfailing dedication to defend a loved one is carried over, by Braithwaite, to his account of his wife's life and death.

Barnes demonstrates the relationship between literary and romantic love by drawing parallels between his narrator's love of his favorite dead author and of his dead wife. Ellen, who Braithwaite claims to have loved absolutely, did not reciprocate his love any more than Flaubert does. She led a separate, private life of affairs which were only crudely concealed. Her infidelity widened the space between them, making Braithwaite unsure that he knew the woman he loved. Her inner life "lay in the . . .

inner chamber of her heart, inaccessible to me." Authors' lives, Barnes asserts, are unknowable; so too, however, are the lives of those closest to us.

One of Flaubert's anecdotes, repeated numerous times by Braithwaite, involves a pair of boys planning to visit a brothel.

They discuss and prepare for the excursion but never actually visit the house of illrepute. This, Braithwaite says, is a perfect example of desire in its purest form: the never-attained, long-anticipated something remains always just beyond reach. That yearned-for something about a lover or an author, which will never be possessed fully, and never known completely is, Barnes' work suggests, what fuels love.

Barnes also considers the nature of memory. This theme is important because it demonstrates possible, psychological reasons for the failure of literary inquiry, one of his primary social concerns. He suggests that the impossibility of writing complete histories or biographies becomes apparent when one recognizes the impossibility of fully categorizing one's own memories. The past is always irretrievable, whether the past one seeks is in an archive or one's own mind. The reason, Barnes suggests, for the failure of memory is its subjectivity: every memory is one's own, individual version of the story. Thus, his narrator concludes, "history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report." Remembering is itself a creative act, as is reconstructing another person's past. The past cannot be related journalistically but only as an imaginative act.

To demonstrate this, Barnes' narrator enters into a kind of debate. Throughout Chapter X Braithwaite defends Flaubert from a list of charges. In each case he cites documentary evidence to show that Flaubert was not, as his critics claim, a reprehensible man. Such a documentary defense, however, does not hold up to Braithwaite's own imaginative capacity. Chapter XI, aptly titled "Louise Colet's Version" is an imagined narrative in Colet's, one of Flaubert's longtime mistresses, voice. Braithwaite, who imagines her ambiguous verdict on her often indifferent lover, is clearly not satisfied with the empirical data he has collected to defend his favorite author. Such information only challenges the version of Flaubert's life which Braithwaite, as a dedicated fan, has already settled upon. Whether Flaubert was a saint or a demon depends more on who answers the question than does any definitive fact of his life.

Style

Points of View

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* is written in several points of view and styles. Some chapters use a first person narrative. Others use a third person omnipresent perspective. Although the novel problematizes our knowledge of the past, the narrator is reliable and trustworthy.

Some chapters use a third person perspective. In most cases, these are the chapters where Barnes deviates from the typical fiction chapter. He includes a chapter that consists of a list of dates, a "dictionary" chapter, and an examination chapter. These chapters are unexpected in a work of fiction, but further the theme of the incompleteness of facts and the past.

Other chapters use a first person narrative, most often from Geoffrey Braithwaite's perspective, although there is one chapter from Louise Colet's perspective. These chapters reveal the inner thoughts of the characters. In Louise Colet's chapter we also see her perspective about her relationship with Flaubert. Geoffrey's chapters include his analysis of Flaubert and his work. These chapters help to give some structure and interpretation to Flaubert's life and art.

Setting

Flaubert's Parrot takes place primarily in Rouen, France. Flaubert lived in Rouen during his adult life and Geoffrey comes to Rouen in the first and last chapter to see where Flaubert lived. Flaubert's house, Croisset, has been turned into a museum, which holds one of the stuffed parrots. The Hotel-Dieu, also now a museum, has the other parrot which is supposed to be the one Flaubert borrowed..

Other parts of the novel take place in England where Geoffrey lives. Geoffrey, Ellen and their children lived in England and Ellen died there. Some of the research that he does on Flaubert happens in England, including the lectures he attends and his meeting with Ed Winterton.

Language and Meaning

Barnes uses simple language, although the format of the book is somewhat complicated, making it more accessible for more mature readers. The novel is told mainly through description and narrative, although there is some dialog in parts, at times directed at the reader. Barnes does not use strong or violent language in the book.

The novel is partly a literary criticism as Geoffrey examines Flaubert and his work. This criticism, as well as Barnes's discussion of the shifting of facts, makes the novel complex. As the format of the chapters changes, along with the voice and perspective, the facts that the reader is presented with also shift. This works well to illustrate how differing perspectives, facts, and voices change our understandings of Flaubert and his work.

Structure

Flaubert's Parrot is made up of fifteen chapters and a short note from the author. The book also provides a list of other books that the author has published.

The plot of the novel is partly linear. Geoffrey's quest for information about Flaubert and his work follow a linear plot. Geoffrey visits two museums in the first chapters and discovers the two stuffed parrots of questionable authenticity. In the last chapter, Geoffrey discovers the "truth" about the parrots. Yet, these chapters often feature long discussions of the past or present events from Flaubert's perspective.

Other chapters, however, take place entirely in the past and deal exclusively with Flaubert. We do not see his life in a linear fashion, but rather theme by theme. One chapter examines how trains influenced his life, for example, while another deals with animals in his life and work.

Quotes

"Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough?" Chapter 1, pg. 12

"Then I saw it. Crouched on top of a high cupboard was another parrot. Also bright green. Also, according to both the *gardienne* and the label on its perch, the very parrot which Flaubert had borrowed from the Museum of Rouen for the writing of *Un coeur simple*...How do you compare two parrots, one already idealized by memory and metaphor, the other a squawking intruder?" Chapter 1, pg. 21

"You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string." Chapter 3, pg. 38

"The brown, the black, the reddish bear are not that far from man, from man's cities, man's friendship even. The coloured bears can mostly be tamed. But the white, the polar bear? It doesn't dance for man's pleasure; it doesn't eat berries; it can't be trapped by a weakness for honey." Chapter 4, pg. 52

"I'd ban coincidences, if I were a dictator of fiction. Well, perhaps not entirely. Coincidences would be permitted in the picaresque; that's where they belong." Chapter 5, pg. 67.

"Whereas the common but passionate reader is allowed to forget; he can go away, be unfaithful with other writers, come back and be entranced again. Domesticity need never intrude on the relationship; it may be sporadic, but when there it is always intense." Chapter 6, pg. 76

"I like these out-of-season crossings. When you're young you prefer the vulgar months, the fullness of the seasons. As you grow older, you learn to like the in-between times, the months that can't make up their minds. Perhaps it's a way of admitting that things can't ever bear the same certainly again. Or perhaps it's just a way of admitting a preference for empty ferries." Chapter 7, pg. 83

"We look at the sun through smoked glass; we must look at the past through coloured glass." Chapter 7, pg. 94

"No, I didn't kill my wife. I might have known you'd think that. First you find out that she's dead; then, a while later, I say that I never killed a single patient. Aha, who *did* you kill, then? The question no doubt appears logical. How easy it is to set off speculations." Chapter 7, pg. 97

"But it all goes to prove my point: what knowledge is useful, what knowledge is true?" Chapter 7, pg. 97

"The past is a distant, receding coastline, and we are all in the same boat. Along the stern rail there is a line of telescopes; each brings the shore into focus at a given distance. If the boat is becalmed, one of the telescopes will be in continual use; it will seem to tell the whole, the unchanging truth. But this is an illusion; and as the boat sets off again, we return to our normal activity: scurrying from one telescope to another, seeing the sharpness fade in one, waiting from the blur to clear in another. And when the blur does clear, we imagine that we have made it do so all by ourselves." Chapter 7, pg. 101

"Trains play little part in Flaubert's fiction. This shows accuracy, however, not prejudice: most of his work is set before the English navies and engineers descended on Normandy." Chapter 8, pg. 113

"Do the books that writers don't write matter? It's easy to forget them, to assume that the apocryphal bibliography must contain nothing but bad ideas, justly abandoned projects, embarrassing first thoughts. It needn't be so: first thoughts are often best, cheeringly rehabilitated by third thoughts after they've been loured at by seconds. Besides, an idea isn't always abandoned because it fails some quality-control test." Chapter 9, pg. 115

"What makes us want to know the worst? It is that we tire of preferring to know the best? Does curiosity always hurdle self-interest? Or is it, more simply, that wanting to know the worst is love's favourite perversion?" Chapter 10, pg. 126

"That's the real distinction between people: not between those who have secrets and those who don't, but between those who want to know everything and those who don't. This search is a sign of love, I maintain." Chapter 10, pg. 127

"But if you love a writer, if you depend upon the drip-feed of his intelligence, if you want to pursue him and find him-despite edits to the contrary-then it's impossible to know too much. You seek the vice as well." Chapter 10, pg. 127

"But here's the difference. With a lover, a wife, when you find the worst-be it infidelity or lack of love, madness of the suicidal spark-you are almost relieved...With a writer you love, the instinct is to defend. This is what I meant earlier: perhaps love for a writer is the purest, the steadiest form of love." Chapter 10, pg. 127

"When she dies, you are not at first surprised. Part of love is preparing for death. You feel confirmed in your love when she dies. You got it right. This is part of it all." Chapter 13, pg. 160

"So, they took the curator to where they kept the reserve collection. You want a parrot? they said. Then go to the section of the birds. They opened the door, and they saw in front of them...fifty parrots." Chapter 15, pg. 187

Key Questions

Flaubert's Parrot is an exceptionally erudite blend of fiction and literary history.

The story of Dr. Braithwaite and a commentary on the life and work of Gustave Flaubert co-exist in a way which makes the work both highly entertaining and enormously informative. It also raises questions (many more than it answers) about the ethical implications of critiquing either a work of literature or its author's life. Perhaps the biographer does, invariably, do violence to an author's life; perhaps the critic does destroy the vitality of the author's work.

Barnes' outlook, however, is not entirely pessimistic; he does not advocate a moratorium on literary scholarship. Instead, he calls the reader's attention to the inadequacy of history and memory, to point out that all writing is, in a way, creative, and that each reader and every writer will interpret books and events differently. The subjective nature of reading is not, to Barnes' mind, a problem, so long as it is recognized.

While concerned with such high-minded topics as the ethics of literary study, Flaubert's Parrot also tells a touching story about a marriage gone wrong. This tale of failed love enhances the reader's understanding of how one forms and maintains a relationship with books. The story of Ellen Braithwaite's affairs and death acts, in a way, like an extended metaphor for the narrator's engagement with the life and works of Gustave Flaubert.

1. What do you think of Barnes' premise about the moral problems raised by literary research? Do academics owe some level of respect to their dead subjects? Does literary criticism kill the beauty of art?

2. Do the personal and historic stories told in Flaubert's Parrot fit well together?

In other words, does this book seem like a coherent whole, or is it two books in one?

3. The book presents two versions of Flaubert's relationship with Louise Colet, one official, one imagined. Which, to your mind, comes closer to the truth?

Why? Is there any way to tell which is more accurate?

4. Does Flaubert's Parrot inspire you to 6. What kind of character do you consider read more of Gustave Flaubert's work? Braithwaite to be? Is he a sympathetic character? Is he likable? Is he reliable?

Topics for Discussion

Discuss how art and life intermingle in the novel. What is Barnes trying to tell us about this relationship? How do both Flaubert and Geoffrey react to it?

Discuss why Geoffrey is searching for an understanding of Flaubert.

The novel features a number of unconventional chapters for a work of fiction. Why do you think Barnes includes these formats?

Compare and contrast Louise Colet and Ellen Braithwaite. Do you think the chapter from Louise's perspective is meant as a way for Geoffrey to look back on his wife? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast Geoffrey and Flaubert. In what ways are the two men similar? Different?

Discuss the idea of the past as something shifting and uncertain.

How does the search for the truth about the two parrots mirror Geoffrey's search for the truth about his marriage?

Choose one of the questions posed in the "Final Examination" chapter and answer it.

Discuss who Flaubert was using Geoffrey's descriptions and the information he provides. What do you think Geoffrey thinks about Flaubert?

Literary Precedents

Flaubert's Parrot fits into a long tradition of metafiction, that is, fiction which radically departs from the norms of narrative and which is often concerned with the nature of fiction. It also shares two of its primary concerns, the impossibility of memory and the nature of literary criticism, with many prominent pieces of literature. Many novels work, like Barnes', to educate the reader about how and why literature works even while it attempts to entertain.

James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" (1965) tells the tale of an AfricanAmerican math teacher and his brother, a jazz pianist and a recovering junky. The story is not told in the usual straightforward narrative manner; instead, it jumps from the past to the future to the present, moving in an improvisational style akin to the aesthetics of jazz. It thus reflects, in its form, the content. In this way, Baldwin's story, like Barnes' novel, reveals a great deal about the nature of fiction. Baldwin's message is similar to Barnes in that both authors assert that texts are inherently unable to fully capture an individual.

More prominent examples of metafiction come from James Joyce, who constantly experimented with the form of his work.

His masterpiece, Ulysses (1922) relates the events of a single story in a constantly shifting style. Each chapter adopts a different literary mode. Joyce, then, introduces alternate methods for presenting narrative material in close juxtaposition, allowing the reader to assess their relative strengths and weaknesses. In his final chapter, Joyce presents a prolonged narrative in stream of consciousness. This form, one free of punctuation, attempts to mimic the flow of an individual's thoughts. It attempts, as Barnes' narrator does, to recover experience and memory.

In Barnes' blending of encyclopedic detail and a compelling story, he is clearly indebted to what many consider the great American novel, Herman Melville's Moby Dick (1851). Like Flaubert's Parrot, Moby Dick is a historical catalogue and a novel in one.

Instead of recounting details of literary history, however, Melville's book gives the reader every piece of information he or she might ever want about nineteenth-century whaling vessels.

Barnes' thematic concerns also have noble predecessors. His fascination with memory recalls Marcel Proust's masterpiece In Search of Lost Time (1927). This enormous book (actually a collection of six volumes) details the memories inspired by an innocuous experience. It meditates on what memory loses and the importance of the small details it retains. Proust dwells on minute events such as turning down a bed or biting into a cookie to demonstrate that these moments, lost to memoirs or journals, are essential aspects of life's pleasure.

Braithwaite's antipathy for literary critics echoes sentiments expressed in many earlier works. One succinct example can be found in Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry" (1921).

This poem opens with the rather unusual line "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." Poetry does not reveal the high truths that critics ascribe to it, Moore suggests. Like Barnes, she is principally enamored of literature because of the joy it brings to the reader.

Similarly, Vladimir Nabakov criticizes the reverence paid to literary critics in his novel Pale Fire (1962). The novel, purportedly the work of a critic closely acquainted with a major poet, implies, in its surprise ending, that criticism is in fact fiction. The narrator, who misleads the reader about his knowledge of the poet's life, is no less creative in his writing than other critics who claim authenticity.

Related Titles

Though none of Barnes' other novels continue the journeys of Dr. Geoffrey Braithwaite, many feature the same themes as Flaubert's Parrot. Barnes is a prolific author with over ten books to his credit. Any reader who enjoys Flaubert's Parrot has a wealth of other material to choose from.

Barnes's most recent work, England,England (1999), is one of a handful concerned primarily with his native country. It tells the story of the egotistical mogul Sir Jack Pitman and his effort to rebuild England as a theme park, or, in his words, a "heritage center." The project is planned for the Isle of Wight, just off England's southern coast.

The story allows Barnes to parody the efforts of media moguls to make culture accessible and easy to digest.

In 1995 Barnes published another book about England, Letters from London. This collection of essays, all originally written for the New Yorker, considers many aspects of English life with Barnes' characteristic wit and insight. He discusses the delicacy of relations between the French and English, the people of two nations with a long history of animosity.

Regardless of any ill-feeling his countrymen might have toward the French, Barnes, as demonstrated by Flaubert's Parrot, is an unabashed Francophile. Some of his other novels, including Cross Channel (1996) and Talking it Over (1991) are set in France. In addition to their settings, both books share thematic concerns with Flaubert's Parrot.

Cross Channel dwells on the nature of memory and the impossibility of recovering the past. Where Flaubert's Parrot considers the effect of losing the past on literary endeavor, Cross Channel considers its effects on individual lives. Talking it Over is a twisting, turning tale of adultery. Thus, Barnes addresses again the subject of infidelity begun with the tale of Ellen Braithwaite in Flaubert's Parrot.

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