A Simple Heart Study Guide

A Simple Heart by Gustave Flaubert

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"A Simple Heart" ("Un Coeur Simple"), by French writer Gustave Flaubert, is one of the stories in his *Three Tales (Trois Contes)*, published in 1877. It received admiring reviews at the time and has continued to be second only to his novel *Madame Bovary* (1857) in recognition and acclaim.

Originally entitled "Le Perroquet" ("The Parrot"), "A Simple Heart" is the story of one woman's apparently fruitless existence. The protagonist, a hardworking, good-hearted, poor and uneducated woman named Félicité, is said to have been modeled after a maid employed by Flaubert's family during his childhood, a much beloved woman of tremendous character. The story is unusual among the author's writings because it is about goodness. In this story of a simple housemaid's life and death, the reader is invited to view a world of boundless, if not reciprocated, love and spirit. Félicité, a woman of simple mind and devoted heart, suffers tremendous loss but continues to her last breath to love unconditionally. Some critics have suggested that Félicité's apparently meaningless life and misplaced worship of the parrot, Loulou—whom she adores and whom she imagines, in her dying moment, to be an incarnation of the Holy Ghost—reflect Flaubert's melancholy and disillusionment with life and with organized religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. Most critics agree that this is a poignant account of a sweet, simple, and unrewarded life, one which may have been happy precisely because it was unexamined. It does not matter that Félicité may have misinterpreted or simply not interpreted many of the events in her life: she dies smiling, and thus lives up to her name to the last.

Author Biography

Much has been made of the relationship between Flaubert's life and his depiction of the servant in "A Simple Heart." There are several notable parallels. During the time Flaubert was writing the story, he suffered some of the greatest loss and depression of his life. His friend and fellow writer George Sand, for whom he undertook the story, died before it was finished, and Flaubert's mistress, the poet Louise Colet, died in 1876. He was forced to sell off part of his family properties, a great and symbolic desolation. It is often said that the tone of this story represents a turning point in Flaubert's work, a point which signals a sympathy for the human spirit, a generosity simply not present in earlier works.

Gustave Flaubert was born in 1821 in Rouen, France, the second of three children of a provincial doctor. He was educated in Rouen and later studied law in Paris, where he began to write. During this time he suffered the first of a lifelong series of epileptic seizures.

Because of his illness, he gave up his studies and dedicated himself fully to his writing. In the next decade he composed several pieces of prose, including some memoirs, but he was in no hurry to publish. In fact, for all of his life, although he was employed solely as a writer, Flaubert appears to have felt no particular compulsion to publish his work. Success, he wrote in a letter to George Sand, is a result; it should not be a goal.

In 1851 he began work on *Madame Bovary*, the novel which would bring him lasting fame and notoriety. Its publication in 1857 caused a scandal; its depiction of adultery and suicide led to an obscenity trial in which the author was narrowly acquitted. Flaubert's realistic writing style contributed to the controversy. Unlike the romantic writers popular at the time, Flaubert did not believe in inspiration and muses; he believed in working very hard at reporting what he saw. He believed in observation and faithful reproduction. That life was closely reproduced in *Madame Bovary* came as a shock to its middle-class readers, and this bourgeois repugnance for self-examination showed even in the critical reviews. Thus George Saintsbury wrote of Flaubert that "he has to a very remarkable degree the art of chaining the attention even when the subject is a distasteful one to the reader." Serious literary critics wrote well of the book, however, and the scandal in the end did nothing but promote Flaubert's literary reputation.

Flaubert never married; he spent most of his life close to home and in relative solitude. He kept a residence in Paris and a country house in Normandy, where he spent much of the year. He continued to write, his publications including the novels *Salammbô* and *L'Education Sentimentale (Sentimental Education*). Three years before his death he published his best-known and perhaps most exemplary works in *Three Tales (Trois Contes*), which contains the story "A Simple Heart." It was with these stories that Flaubert's mature genius finally produced what George Sand had once urged him to write, a "literature of consolation rather than desolation."

Plot Summary

Part I

"A Simple Heart" opens with a description of "Madame Aubain's servant Félicité as having been "the envy of the ladies of Pont-l'Évêque for half a century." As cook and general servant she does all the work of the household for a mere four pounds a year while remaining "faithful to her mistress, unamiable as the latter was."

Madame Aubain has been left a widow with many debts and two small children, but after selling most of her property she manages to make do. The family lives in a musty old house filled with dilapidated furniture. Félicité is described as scrupulously clean, thrifty, and energetic. She always wears the same clothes; she seems untouched by the passing years, always looking about forty; she is "like a woman made of wood, and going by clockwork."

Part II

Orphaned early, as a girl Félicité works on one farm as a cowherd, then on another as a dairymaid. When she is eighteen, she attends a dance in a nearby town where she is dazzled by the light and the noise. There she meets a young man, Theodore, who offers to walk her home, roughly tries to have sex with her, and leaves when she begins to protest. Later she encounters Theodore again and begins a romance involving his passionate overtures and her consistent refusals; out of frustration or simply out of "artlessness," Theodore proposes marriage. One evening when she goes to meet him, however, she is met by one of his friends, who tells her Theodore has decided to marry a wealthy old woman, Madame Lehoussais, who can pay to keep him from being drafted into the army. Heartbroken, she leaves the farm and goes to Pont-l'Évêque, where she is hired by Madame Aubain.

Félicité soon becomes an exemplary housekeeper. She is especially enthralled with the children— Paul, who is seven, and Virginie, who is Four—and Madame Aubain admonishes her for kissing them too much. Monsieur Bourais, a retired solicitor, handles Madame's affairs and visits frequently, at one point bringing a geography book to the children. Paul explains the pictures to Félicité: this is the sum of her formal education. The family sometimes visits the Geffosses Farm, part of the slight property Madame has managed to retain. One day Félicité saves the entire family from an angry bull, keeping it at bay by throwing clods of earth at it; the tale becomes a local legend, but Félicité does not see her actions as anything unusual.

As a result of her fright with the bull, Virginie develops a nervous ailment, and the family spends some weeks at Trouville on the coast. There Félicité happens to meet one of her long-lost sisters. Madame Aubain becomes annoyed at the frequent visits of the sister and her children and at Félicité's habit of making them presents. When the family

returns home, Paul is sent to a boys' school in Caen. Félicité is saddened but soon distracts herself with Virginie's catechism classes.

Part III

Accompanying Virginie to her catechism lessons, Félicité—who had had no religious education as a child—becomes profoundly caught up in the ritual and the emotional quality of Catholic observances.

When Virginie makes her first communion, Félicité is as excited and nervous as if she herself were the communicant. Soon Virginie is sent off to a convent school, and Félicité mourns her absence deeply. To distract herself from her grief she asks and receives permission to have Sunday visits from her nephew, Victor. She soon comes to dote on him, making him dinner and mending his clothes, while he, at his parents' instructions, always tries "to get something out of her—a packet of moist sugar, it might be, a cake of soap, spirits, or even money at times." Victor, however, soon leaves her as well, bound by ship for Cuba. Félicité hurries to see him off, but his ship is leaving just as she arrives at the quay, and she merely glimpses him as the ship moves out. She worries about him constantly; when she has not heard from him for several months, she begs Monsieur Bourais to show her Havana on the map, asking him to point out the house where her nephew lives. Monsieur Bourais laughs at her simplemindedness. Soon afterward she receives a letter from her brother-in-law. Unable to read, she takes it to her mistress, who informs her that her nephew has died.

Virginie, in her convent school, now begins to grow weaker, suffering from a lung disease. The girl soon dies. Félicité keeps vigil by the body for two nights and prepares it for burial. In the weeks after the funeral Madame Aubain seems in danger of slipping into despair, but Félicité "lectured her gently," reminding her mistress of her duty to her remaining child and to her daughter's memory. The doctors forbid the mother to visit Virginie's grave, but Félicité visits it every day and tends it carefully, so that when Madame Aubain is finally allowed to visit it she is greatly comforted.

Several years go by, and many of Madame Aubain's acquaintances pass away. Paul becomes a drunkard who is constantly in debt, to his mother's grief. Madame Aubain and Félicité often take walks and talk about Virginie. Eventually Félicité helps her mistress sort out her dead daughter's things. Félicité asks for an old plush hat as a keepsake, and in the emotion of the moment the two women connect in a way they never have before:

Their eyes met fixedly and filled with tears; at last the mistress opened her arms, the servant threw herself into them, and they embraced each other, satisfying their grief in a kiss that made them equal. It was the first time in their lives, Mme. Aubain's nature not being expansive. Félicité was as grateful as though she had received a favor, and cherished her mistress from that moment with the devotion of an animal and a religious worship. (Excerpt from "A Simple Heart," translated by Arthur McDonnell)

Félicité's kindness blooms; she nurses cholera patients, assists Polish refugees, and cares for a homeless old man, father Colmiche, suspected of committing atrocities during the French Revolution. On the day the old man dies, an acquaintance who is moving out of town presents her pet parrot to Madame Aubain. Félicité has been fascinated with the parrot for some time; because it came from America, it reminds her of her dead nephew Victor.

Part IV

The parrot, whose name is Loulou, has such annoying habits that Madame Aubain turns him over to Félicité, who teaches him to speak and becomes extremely attached to him. One day, after Félicité leaves him on the grass for a moment, he disappears. Frantic, she looks for him all over town. Loulou returns, but Félicité suffers a chill and as a result loses some of her hearing. Three years later she is completely deaf, able to hear only the parrot. They have conversations together, he repeating his limited repertoire—phrases such as "Nice boy!" "Your servant, sir!" and "Good morning, Marie!" When Loulou dies, Félicité weeps so vigorously that Madame suggests she have him stuffed. Not trusting the mail system, she walks the dead parrot to Honfleur for stuffing. En route, she is knocked down by a wagon, whose driver lashes her with the whip; but she gets up and goes on.

Félicité installs the stuffed parrot in her room and treats it with reverence. Noticing a resemblance between the stuffed bird and depictions of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, she buys a cheap color print in which the similarity is particularly striking and hangs it in her room. In her prayers, the parrot becomes increasingly confused with the Holy Spirit.

Paul, now thirty-six, finally finds a niche in the Registrar's Office and becomes engaged to the inspector's daughter, who looks down on the provincialism of Pont-l'Évêque. Soon afterwards, Madame Aubain dies, mourned primarily by Félicité. The heirs remove most of the furniture and threaten Félicité with eviction. Since no one leases or buys the house, however, she continues to live there for several years on her small pension as the house gradually falls into complete disrepair. Finally she falls ill with pneumonia. After Easter; one of the public altars is set up in Madame Aubain's garden. Upset that she has nothing to contribute to the decorations on the altar, Félicité asks Mere Simon, who is nursing her, to put Loulou on the altar.

Part V

As Félicité lies dying, a religious procession comes to the garden, and she sees it as if she is there. Smelling the incense, she smiles. In her final moments, she thinks she sees the heavens open, and hovering above her head—like the Holy Spirit in a religious painting—a giant parrot.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Madame Aubain has an extraordinary maidservant, Félicité. She can do everything from housework to bridling a horse to caring for poultry, and she works for a very low wage.

Madame Aubain is a widow who was left with so much debt when her husband died that she has moved into a less expensive house and sold all her other properties to pay off debt. She has retained two farms for the income that provides a livelihood for her and her family.

The house is described in detail in this chapter. While it is well furnished, the parlor smells a little musty, since it is a partial basement. Madame sits in the parlor all day. Her very large bedroom has patterned wallpaper. A portrait of her late husband dominates this room. The bedroom and drawing room are also on this floor but on a higher level than the parlor. Félicité's room is on the second floor.

Félicité works from dawn to dark and is an excellent housekeeper and manager of the budget. She wears a printed calico blouse, a bonnet, gray stockings, a red skirt, and over it all an apron. She has a thin face and a sharp voice and looks older than her 25 years. She moves deliberately, "like a wooden doll driven by clock-work."

Chapter 1 Analysis

Beginning with the Greek dramatists several centuries before the coming of Christ through the early years of the 19th Century, there was a commonly accepted principle that applied to the writing of fiction: the hero must be from the upper class of society. For the Greeks, this was usually kings or gods. Shakespeare might have included common people in his plays for functional and practical purposes, but his heroes and heroines were usually nobility of one sort or another.

The Realistic Movement, which began in the 18th Century with writers such as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett, came into its own in the 19th Century, and Gustave Flaubert, the French writer who created A Simple Heart is an important representative of this form of fiction. They took as their subjects middle- and lower-class characters, and they attempted to portray in a realistic way what life was like for people in these classes in their own societies. They were interested in creating pictures of what their attitudes, physical settings, and living conditions actually were.

A Simple Heart is a good example of a realistic story. The main character—the heroine, the protagonist—is from the very lowest level of society in 19th Century France. She not only is the housekeeper in this family, she also does much of the outdoor work. We will follow her in minute detail as we observe and are able to participate in her life. We see very little that would make her life rewarding, yet the remarkable thing that makes this

character heroic is that she finds joy and pleasure in her life and accepts without complaint the misery and the pain.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Félicité's father and mother die early and her sisters go away to make their own lives, leaving Félicité alone; so, she goes to work for a farmer, looking after his cattle. This farmer mistreats her, subjecting her to beatings and to wearing rags. She is ultimately dismissed for a theft that she did not commit; she then goes to work for another farmer, caring for the chickens.

The family takes her to a fair, where she is bewildered by what she sees and hears since her life has consisted only of work up until now. A young man named Théodore asks her to dance and buys her food, cider, and a silk neckerchief. He offers to take her home, but pushes her to the ground once they are out of sight of the fair-goers. She screams for help, and he runs away.

She encounters him again on a road and he asks her forgiveness, blaming it on the drink. He tells her that they are neighbors and that he is looking for a wife. He kisses her and she runs away, but later they agree to rendezvous several times. She continues to resist his passion, so he proposes. He misses one of their dates and a friend comes instead to tell her that Théodore has married a rich old woman, and Félicité will not see him again.

She tells the farmer that she is leaving, and taking her wages goes to Pont-l'Evêque, where she meets Madame Aubain by chance and agrees to go to work for her. Félicité is immediately made a member of the household.

Madame's children, Paul, 7, and Virginie, 4, are treasured by Félicité. She spends as much time as possible with them and settles into a happy routine. On Thursdays, friends come and play card games. Monday is market day and two farmers; Robelin and Liébard come to the door offering hens or cheeses for sale. Félicité handles them adroitly, and they respect her.

Mme's alcoholic uncle appears from time to time, and Félicité pushes him out the door when she feels that he has had enough to drink of Mme's wine. M. Bourais, a retired solicitor who looks after Mme's property, comes from time to time and spends hours in the study with her. He brings the children geography books with illustrations. Paul explains them to Félicité, the only education she has ever had. Paul and Virginie are tutored by one Guyot.

On nice days, the family visits one of the farms still owned by Madame Félicité packs a picnic. Madame reminisces and the children run and play. One day on the trip home, they are chased by a bull. Félicité tosses clods of dirt into its eyes while the family escapes. Félicité barely gets away between two bars of the gate. While people talk about how heroic she was, Félicité does not feel any pride in what she has done.

Little Virginie has been so traumatized by the ordeal with the bull that she is ill, so they go to a seaside resort to help her recover. They stop for lunch with the Liébard family; long-time friends of Madame's late husband then proceed to the Golden Lamb in Trouville. This extended visit is described in idyllic terms in the next paragraphs. Virginie becomes stronger, and they spend their time taking short trips with the children playing, Madame doing needlework, and Félicité gathering herbs. They also take boat trips from time to time, but mostly they watch the boats come and go.

One day, Félicité discovers that one of her sisters lives nearby and they are reunited. The sister has three small children. Félicité buys things for them, which Madame considers a weakness, and soon they go back home to Pont-l'Evêque.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter introduces the children and further develops the character of the protagonist, Félicité. We are told of her tragic life up to now, and even though she works hard and puts up with hardship in her new family, she is secure and has companionship. We are able to see her heroic and giving nature in the encounter with the bull where she protects the family at her own peril but refuses to accept the designation of heroism. Although she has few possessions, she unselfishly shares them with her family when she is reunited with them. The theme of the story—unconditional love—is established in this chapter.

Virginie's delicate health as demonstrated in this chapter is a foreshadowing of her death, which will occur in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Paul is sent away to school, and Félicité takes Virginie to catechism every day. Félicité is greatly moved by the stories, particularly of the Passion. A stained glass window has the Holy Ghost looking down on the Virgin, another the Virgin kneeling before the baby Jesus. This is all new to Félicité because her own religion was neglected in your youth. She participates along with the little girl in all the activities related to the training. She fasts along with Virginie, goes to communion with her and observes the special days. She is puzzled about exactly what the Holy Ghost is because sometimes it is a bird, sometimes a fire and sometimes a breath.

She prepares for Virginie's first communion with much excitement, and she is deeply moved by the children's ceremony, feeling that she is participating as well. The next day, she asks the priest to give her communion, but she is disappointed because she does not feel the same wonder as she had with the children's service.

Madame decides that Virginie must go away to school, much to Félicité's consternation, but she reasons that she is not equipped to make that decision, so she accepts it and packs jams, fruits, and a bunch of violets to send with the little girl.

Madame is sad and misses her little daughter but she is comforted by friends. Virginie writes three times a week, and she consoles herself. Félicité, meanwhile, is distraught with grief over the absence of Virginie and tries to comfort herself by going to her room. Then she asks to have her nephew Victor come and see her, and permission is granted. She takes pleasure in feeding him and going to church with him. His parents tell him to try to get what he can from her, and he brings her his mending, which she does, thinking it will be sure to bring him back.

Paul and Virginie come home for a holiday, but they have changed, and she no longer feels so close to them.

Victor is taking trips with his father and is bringing her gifts from the places he is visiting, including a box covered with shells. He is growing up now and is a good-looking young man. Then he announces that he is taking an ocean trip and might be away for two years. She walks the ten miles to the harbor where his ship will be departing. She loses her way and arrives at the ship just as it is leaving, and she does not get to bid him goodbye. It is dark when she starts home, and, passing a church, she stands praying, her face covered with tears, and commends to God's mercy all that she holds most dear. The maids at the inn are just waking up as she arrives back in Pont-l'Evêque. She hurries to be at home before dawn because Madame will be unhappy with her if she is not there. She worries about her nephew and thinks of him constantly.

Meanwhile, Virginie's health is not strong, and the nuns are not reporting as often as Madame thinks they should. She dismisses Félicité's concerns about her nephew as nothing compared to her daughter, since he is only a cabin boy, but Félicité is indignant. "For her, the two children were of equal importance; they were linked together in her heart by a single bond, and their destinies should be the same." However, she forgives, understanding that Madame is worried about the little girl.

She learns that Victor's ship has arrived in Havana, and she wonders if it would be possible for him to return by land in case of emergency. She asks M. Bourais, the solicitor who cares for Madame's property, which gets out an atlas and explains latitudes, longitudes, and the like to her, and then shows her Havana.

Then she gets a letter from Victor's father, which Madame reads for her. It contains the bad news that Victor is dead. Madame suggests that she go to visit her sister in Trouville, but Félicité declines, saying, "It doesn't matter a bit, not to them it doesn't." Therefore, she goes to the riverbank to do the laundry and takes her pain and frustration out by pounding the clothes. She holds up until evening, when she gives way to it in her room and cries. She learns later that he died of yellow fever. She remembers that his parents had always treated him cruelly, so she made no effort to see them. Anyway, we are told, "they had forgotten about her."

Virginie is growing weaker, having difficulty breathing, fits of coughing, and bouts of fever. Madame goes to the convent every Tuesday. The little girl begins to improve and seems to be on the mend. However, she catches pneumonia, and a driver comes to get her mother. Félicité takes time to light a candle at the church and then runs to catch the wagon. After an hour of running, she catches it and grabs the fringe. Just as she does, she realizes that the courtyard was not locked up, so she returns home. She waits all day for word and finally at twilight catches a coach to go to the school. As she descends the hill to the school, she hears the tolling of the death-bell. The little girl is dead.

Félicité goes to Virginie's room and finds the child lying on her bed with Madame holding the foot of the bed sobbing. Some nuns lead Madame away, but for two nights Félicité never leaves the body, praying and sprinkling holy water on the sheets from time to time. She takes care of preparing the body and putting it into the coffin, cutting a lock of the hair to keep for herself.

The funeral is in Pont-l'Evêque. The mother is distraught and is unable to visit the cemetery, but Félicité visits every day, maintaining a tiny garden.

The years pass, and the old friends disappear. Paul seems incapable of finding a career and his mother must continually pay his debts. The two women mourn Virginie, finally coming together in an embrace because of their grief. Thereafter, Félicité is deeply devoted to her mistress, and her heart "grew softer as time went by."

She does good works such as offering cider to soldiers who march in the streets and helping Polish refugees. Félicité is given a parrot by the daughters of a local baron, who

is leaving because of a promotion. She understands that the bird came from America, which reminds her of Victor.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The reference to the depiction of the Holy Ghost in the stained glass window is a foreshadowing of the story of the parrot that will come in the later chapters of the book.

Writers write what they know, and most fiction is in some respects taken from the life of the author. There are, of course, degrees to which a work of fiction is autobiographical—that is, recreates the writer's life. This particular work by Flaubert is highly autobiographical in that it is set in actual places where he had been. In fact, his mother came from Pont-l'Evêque; his aunt lived there, and he had visited there often. His own family had vacationed at Trouville. The places mentioned in this story are all real. The farm of Gefosses actually belonged to the Flaubert family, and there was a Golden Lamb at Trouville. Many of the characters are people from his own life with only minor alterations in their names. This is not a common practice among writers of fiction. Typically, they will deliberately find ways to disguise the actual place or person by various means, but apparently with Flaubert, who was focused on writing in the realistic mode, this was not necessary or useful.

Allusion is a tool often used in literature to connect with readers' own knowledge base. By definition, allusion is an implied or indirect reference to a person, event, thing or a part of another text. Allusions are usually based on the assumption that the writer and reader have a body of knowledge in common. A writer who has spent time on the sea will very likely use maritime allusions; a writer who has grown up in New York City will very likely use allusions to that commonly recognized body of information. A writer who has grown up on a farm is likely to use agricultural allusions.

One of the most common types is biblical allusion—that is, a symbol or a reference that will be held in common with readers, most of who have been exposed to the Christian scriptures. This does not necessarily suggest that the author is assuming the role of preacher. It is a literary device that increases the enjoyment of the work and to underscore a theme the writer wishes to convey.

In "A Simple Heart," the primary allusion, although there are others, is to the Apostle Paul's definition of love in his first letter to the Church at Corinth:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Love

bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (I Cor. 13:1-8 NIV paraphrased).

For Flaubert, the character Félicité embodies this selfless, unconditional love. Even though she suffers loss, she is not bitter; when Madame implies that Victor's loss is not as significant as that of her daughter, Félicité forgives her, echoing the Apostle's words: love is not provoked and does not take into account a wrong suffered. When she risks her own life and she is considered a heroine in the community, she rejects the designation, again reminding one of Paul's definitions: love does not brag and is not arrogant.

She certainly fits the definition in that she bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things and endured all things. When she found her sister's family, even though her own income was extremely limited, she gave to them, again echoing the biblical definition.

Flaubert purposely chose a simple woman with no religious instruction and no education to represent this profound principle that he, himself, had been taught. While he had been brought up in the church, at the stage of his life when this story was written, he was critical of it as an institution. Perhaps his message was to clergy as much as to other readers and was a reminder of what true religion is. Whatever his purpose, he makes very effective use of allusion by calling to mind a teaching that he could expect that most of his readers would be familiar with.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The parrot's name is Loulou, and Félicité trains him to say "Nice boy! Your servant, sir! Hail Mary!" He is allowed to wander all over the house. One day he disappears, and she exhausts herself looking for him all over town but returns home disconsolate. Almost immediately, he returns and lands on her shoulder.

Félicité becomes ill because of this ordeal, has a chill and begins to lose her hearing. Although she recovers from the illness, within three years she is deaf. Loulou becomes the only companion with whom she can communicate. Then one day he is dead. She is so overcome with grief that she decides to have him stuffed at the suggestion of Madame On the way to take Loulou to the man who is going to do the job, she is injured by the driver of a carriage who uses his whiplash on her because she didn't get out of his way. She could not hear him yelling, of course. He did not stop to help her, so she pulls herself together and goes on her way

As she approaches her destination, she is overcome with memories—the misery of her childhood and all her losses—her first love, her nephew, Virginie, and now Loulou. She leaves the parrot but must wait six months to get him back. When she does get him, he is on a branch screwed into a base. She thinks he looks magnificent. Félicité shuts him up in her room along with all the objects she has collected through the years, most prominent of which are the box covered with shells that was given to her by Victor, and a little hat of Virginie's.

Her life consists of staying in her room, coming out only for religious occasions. She begins to notice that the Holy Ghost in the stained-glass window at the church looks like the parrot. She finds a print depicting the same scene and puts it up in her room alongside the stuffed parrot. She feels that "God the Father could not have chosen a dove as a means of expressing Himself, since doves cannot talk, but rather one of Loulou's ancestors."

Paul has finally gotten himself together, and he is in business in government at the Wills and Probate Department. He is going to be married to the daughter of one of his auditors.

M. Bourais dies, possibly of suicide, and Madame discovers that he has been embezzling from her. This upsets Madame greatly, and she becomes ill and dies at the age of seventy-two. Not many people come to her funeral, but Félicité weeps for her as she would for a member of her family. Ten days later, the daughter-in-law comes and cleans out the house, taking everything of value and putting the house up for sale. Félicité has a pension left her by Madame, but she does not want to leave her room. She has taken to kneeling in front of the parrot to say her prayers.

As the years go by, the house is neither sold nor rented. It falls into disrepair and the roof leaks into Félicité's room. She comes down with pneumonia and becomes gradually more ill. She is distressed that she cannot do her part to set up the altars of repose, so she begs the curé to accept Loulou after she dies, and he agrees to do so. The parrot is now in bad shape: worms have eaten on him, one wing is broken and the stuffing is coming out of his stomach.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This story has been about a brave and courageous soul living a life of hardship and loss with courage and forbearance. She is truly heroic although we know that she would have rejected that designation. The conflicts are between the courage and determination of this heroic character and an indifferent and often cruel world. In the end, the world seems to have won. She has only memories and a few prized possessions to remind her of the people she has loved and given to. Even her beloved parrot is only an inanimate stuffed object, but as she has lived, so she prepares to die. She gives Loulou to the priest.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Friends and neighbors care for Félicité around the clock. One of the altars has been set up in the courtyard of Madame's house, and the parrot is a part of the display. As she breathes her last, she can smell the incense, and she thinks she can see, in the opening heavens, a gigantic parrot hovering.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This story is considered by many to be Flaubert's best. It is a departure from his other writing in that it is so emotional and so compassionate. He treats a downtrodden character with great sympathy and establishes her as a true heroine. The world does not overcome her loving nature. When asked why he included the parrot that she mistook for the Holy Ghost, he said that it was not an attempt at irony but very serious and very sad. "I want to move tender hearts to pity and tears," he said, "for I am tender-hearted myself."

In addition, we see at the end that the world did not break the spirit of this unusual heroine. Her unconditional love won out in the end. Her kindness pays off in that loving friends care for her when she can no longer care for herself. The action in this story can be defined as "rising." The conflicts are apparent from the very first word, and the climax comes when Madame is gone and Félicité is left with no one to defend her, yet she does not become discouraged or defeated.

Flaubert wrote many love stories of the kind that we usually expect, where relationships between the sexes are the themes. This is also a love story, and it turned out to be his best.

Characters

Madame Aubain

Madame Aubain employs Félicité in her service for half a century. At the beginning of Félicité's employment Madame is the mother of Paul, seven, and Virginie, four, and the widow of a man who has left her with many debts. Although Madame Aubain rarely displays affection or appreciation for her servant, Félicité is deeply devoted to her and in many ways protects her. It is Félicité who bargains with tradespeople, who eases obnoxious visitors out of the house, who saves the family from an angry bull they encounter during an outing. When Virginie dies, it is Félicité who keeps vigil by the body and tends the grave, since Madame is too overcome to do so. Most of Félicité's possessions, including the parrot, Loulou, are Madame's castoffs. When Madame dies, few mourn her; she always kept people at a distance. Félicité, on the other hand, is devastated.

Félicité

Félicité is Madame Aubain's faithful servant and the central character of the story. She is a woman of simple mind and simple heart, a believer in the supernatural, clean living, and hard work. Orphaned early in her life, she is a cow-herder and dairy girl until a broken heart compels her to leave and seek work in a nearby town, Pont-l'Évêque. Thus, at eighteen, she is hired by Madame Aubain as a cook and housemaid. She soon takes over the running of the household while forming a succession of deep emotional attachments to Madame and her two children, to her own nephew, and ultimately to her parrot, Loulou. When the parrot dies, she has it stuffed and keeps it in her room.

Although Félicité's devotion is almost never reciprocated or appreciated, her need to love never flags. Despite a life of hard work, repeated disappointment, and the gradual loss of everyone dear to her, she is unwavering in her faith. As she grows older, she begins to confuse the stuffed parrot with images of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that she sees in religious paintings and stained-glass windows. As she lies dying of pneumonia, she has a vision of the heavens opening and the Holy Ghost descending upon her in the form of a giant parrot, and she dies smiling.

Loulou

Loulou the parrot is the final love of Félicité's life. He originally belongs to the wife of a government official whose family pays social calls on Madame Aubain. Because the bird comes from America, he reminds Félicité of her nephew, Victor, who died in Cuba. When the official is transferred to another district, the wife gives the parrot to Madame Aubain, but his habits so annoy her that she turns him over to Félicité. Félicité becomes very attached to him. When he goes missing one day Félicité searches for him all over town. The bird eventually returns on his own, but in searching for him Félicité has

caught a chill, and the ensuing illness leaves her deaf. Subsequently the only sound she seems able to hear is that of the parrot repeating his meaningless phrases.

When Loulou dies, Félicité has him stuffed and puts him in her bedroom. Noting his resemblance to certain depictions of the Holy Spirit, she gradually begins to focus her prayers on the dead bird as a sort of religious icon. As she lies dying, she has a vision of the parrot as the Holy Spirit, and she dies smiling.

Madame

See Madame Aubain

Parrot

See Loulou

Paul

Madame Aubain's son and Virginie's brother, Paul is seven years old when Félicité enters the family's service. Félicité quickly becomes attached to both the boy and his sister and is saddened when he is sent away to school in Caen at a young age. As an adult, Paul passes from one unsuccessful career to another, spending his time in taverns and running up debts which his mother pays off. At the age of thirty-six, shortly before his mother's death, he finds apparent success at the Registrar's Office, where an inspector offers Paul his daughter's hand and a promotion.

Theodore

Félicité's first and only romantic interest, Theodore is a farmhand who meets Félicité at a fair when she is eighteen. A night after Félicité resists his passionate overtures, Theodore proposes marriage. One day, however, he fails to show up for one of their meetings, sending a friend to say that he has decided to marry a wealthy elderly woman, Madame Lehoussais, who he hopes will pay to protect him from conscription into the army. Félicité then leaves the farm and goes to the town of Pontl'Évêque, where she is hired by Madame Aubain. Many years later Félicité overhears a comment that suggests Madame Lehoussais did not marry Theodore after all, but the matter is never resolved.

Victor

Victor is Félicité's nephew and one of her many profound and simple attachments. She first discovers his existence when she is visiting the seaside with the Aubain family and comes across one of her sisters—Victor's mother—whom she has not seen since she

was a child. Félicité asks that Victor be allowed to visit her after Virginie is sent away to school. Félicité dotes on Victor, cooks him dinner, and mends his clothes. He, on the other hand, at the urging of his parents, never fails to ask her for food or money to take home. Eventually he signs on as a cabin boy on a ship sailing to America. Félicité walks the twelve miles to Honfleur to see him off, but the ship is leaving and she merely gets a glimpse of him as it pulls out. Months later she learns that he has died in Cuba: the doctors bled him too severely while treating him for yellow fever. Victor is one of the reasons for Félicité's attachment to the parrot, Loulou—Loulou reminds her of America, the place where Victor died.

Virginie

The daughter of Madame Aubain, Virginie is four when Félicité enters the household. A close call with an angry bull leaves the child suffering from a nervous complaint, and the whole family spends several weeks at the seaside in an attempt to cure her. Félicité accompanies her to her catechism classes, where the housemaid develops a fervent if simple religious faith; Félicité experiences Virginie's first communion as profoundly as if it were her own. Soon thereafter the child is sent away to a convent school, and Félicité is deeply grieved. When Virginie dies of a lung infection, Félicité keeps a vigil by the body, and later she visits Virginie's grave every day. Both Madame and Félicité mourn deeply for her, and their shared grief leads to Madame's one reported open display of affection towards her housemaid. A moth-eaten hat that belonged to Virginie is one of Félicité's most precious possessions.

Themes

God and Organized Religion

As in many of his earlier works, in "A Simple Heart" Flaubert dealt with notions of simplicity, sainthood, religious faith, and duty. Many critics have interpreted this story as a profound but veiled critique of organized religion—particularly the Roman Catholic church in nineteenth-century France— and of its unquestioning following among the bourgeoisie, or middle class. As a realist writer, Flaubert believed the artist must not express his opinions in his works. The story's reputed critique of the Church is not explicit—critics find it conveyed through such techniques as irony and symbolism. Félicité's vicarious devotion to the church through Virginie's first communion experience, while passionate and profound, is also arbitrary and circumstantial. She comes upon her faith by chance, by the simple accident of being required to accompany her young charge to her religion classes. Her devotion to the church is not based on an embrace of its beliefs: "Of doctrines she understood nothing—did not even try to understand." Rather, it stems from an emotional reaction to the stories told by the priest, full of familiar images of country life, and to the mystery and pomp of the communion ceremony. Moreover, Félicité's religious devotion eventually becomes indistinguishable in her mind from her devotion to her dead parrot.

Duty and Responsibility

A not-unrelated theme is that of duty and responsibility. In her simplicity, which makes possible her tremendous capacity to love, Félicité never questions her duty or her responsibility. Her determination in this respect is dogged, whether or not it is admirable. She works relentlessly for half a century for a ridiculously low wage, without complaint. When she rescues the family from the raging bull, she endangers her own life without a second thought. When she walks through the night to bid adieu to Victor, she does not question the wisdom of or reason for her task, and when she is knocked over while taking her dead parrot to be stuffed, she simply picks herself up and continues her journey. Her simplicity makes her virtually unstoppable, except by death. While Félicité herself is never portrayed in a negative light, her consistent history of disappointment, loss, and exploitation by others throws into question the value of such blind and unswerving devotion in the face of a thankless and unrewarding world.

Innocence and Ignorance

Félicité embodies innocence and Christian charity; she is virtuous and self-abnegating and good. At eighteen she does not at first seem to suspect that Theodore, the young man who befriends her at a dance, has any ulterior motive—when he makes sexual advances she is frightened and cries out. Later, the narrator remarks that "she was not innocent as young ladies are—she had learned knowledge from the animals—but her

reason and the instinct of her honour would not let her fall." After saving her mistress's family from the bull, she has "not the barest suspicion that she had done anything heroic." She is ignorant in some ways—for example, "so stunted was her mind" that she thinks one can see a particular house on a map, and though she takes Virginie to catechism, she understands nothing about doctrine. She cannot read. When Virginie dies and Félicité keeps vigil, the narrator notes that if Virginie had revived during her watch Félicité "would not have been immensely surprised . . . to minds like hers the supernatural is quite simple."

Wealth, Poverty, and Exploitation

Simple, uneducated, and poor, Félicité is repeatedly exploited and victimized, from her early days as a farm worker to her relationship with Theodore to her service with Madame Aubain. She is used by everyone she loves; everyone leaves her; sadness repeatedly threatens to destroy her. Yet she is so unaware of evil, so accepting of good, that she is incorruptible. Her heart, as the title suggests, is simple enough to be pure, and her capacity to love is her wealth.

Death, Time, and Loss

While death is a recurring theme in "A Simple Heart," time and loss seem more important to the story as a whole. Death is ever-present, a product of time and a vehicle of loss. Félicité is orphaned at an early age and separated from her siblings. When she does locate one of her sisters, the woman seems primarily interested in taking advantage of her. With the passage of time she suffers the loss of Theodore, her only human lover, of Virginie, Victor, Paul, and even of Madame Aubain. Always poor, she is threatened after her employer's death with eviction from her home. She seems to have no control over her losses. When her parrot disappears, her frantic efforts to find him prove fruitless, although the bird comes back on his own. Victor's ship disappears just as she arrives to see him off. She loses the chance to see Virginie before the girl dies, arriving too late because she stayed behind to lock the house out of duty to Madame Aubain's interests. Toward the end, she is physically diminishing, growing smaller, becoming deaf. She hears, literally and figuratively, only the voice of the parrot, and the parrot can only repeat empty phrases. "The little circle of her ideas grew narrower and narrower." Thus her small world becomes ever smaller, until it is reduced to a single vision of a dead parrot as the Holy Ghost. The related themes of time as erosive, of loss as inevitable, become one theme as her death approaches.

Style

Point of View

Critic Victor Brombert has said that Flaubert's great accomplishment in "A Simple Heart" was that he presented a protagonist, or central character, who is completely inarticulate and uneducated, and yet he made the reader view things as she does. The author allowed the reader to view Félicité's character from both the outside and the inside: from the outside, through the omniscient narrator's impassive and factual account of events and of the attitudes of other characters towards her; from the inside, through the narrator's reports of her thoughts, actions, and motives. The contrasts that are introduced between Félicité's generous acts and thoughts and the generally self-centered and callous reactions of the more sophisticated characters around her create sympathy for the main character and an implied critique of her supposed superiors. Since the narrative voice never offers a direct opinion of the action, however, the reader is left to form his or her own interpretation of the story's meaning.

Irony

Irony is a use of language in which the intended meaning appears to be different from what is directly stated. The narrative voice in "A Simple Heart," for instance, may be seen as ironic because although it offers no direct commentary on the story, the evidence it reports builds sympathy for the main character and exposes the shallowness and egoism of those who exploit her.

The more subtle the irony, the more difficult it may be to determine exactly what is meant. Critics disagree about the extent and meaning of Flaubert's use of irony in "A Simple Heart." Much of Félicité's behavior—such as her devotion to her parrot, which eventually approaches idolatry—is so simpleminded as to seem absurd. Yet Félicité herself is so selfless in her love and so unconquerable in her resistance to despair that to most readers she is a likable and sympathetic character; no matter how simple and naive her actions, she herself does not seem ridiculous.

Symbolism

Loulou is the most obvious symbol in the story, although there are many more. As a parrot, he can only repeat empty phrases, generally out of context, and thus he is a particularly ironic symbol as the vehicle through which Félicité should experience divinity. Félicité's deafness in her old age is symbolic of her inability to comprehend or interpret the world around her. Many of the names in the story also appear to have symbolic significance, often with ironic overtones. Félicité (whose name, like the English word "felicity," implies both happiness and good fortune) lives a life of repeated misfortune and great sadness, but she dies smiling. Victor is certainly not victorious; Virginie dies before she lives, virginal by default, another life wasted; "aubaine," in

French, refers to a godsend or windfall, but while Félicité may see Madame Aubain in this light, one could argue that Félicité was less than fortunate in her choice of employers.

Realism

Flaubert was one of the leaders of the realist movement in French literature, which sought to portray life in a realistic manner primarily through the use of an objective narrative point of view and the accumulation of accurate details. He believed in meticulous observation and exact reporting of events. He also held firmly that the writer must not express his opinion through his art—that he must simply tell the story. Thus in "A Simple Heart," the narrator reports the story of Félicité's life without commentary or reflection. The reader is thus obliged to draw his or her own conclusions—much as in real life.

Historical Context

Romanticism and Realism in Nineteenth-Century France

Flaubert figures as one of the leading authors of the realist movement, and "A Simple Heart" is typical of his work in this regard. Realistic writers sought to represent life in its purest form, without exaggeration or embellishment. They considered themselves reporters, attempting to chronicle their worlds honestly and objectively. Conventional morality was not a concern: logic, common sense, and pragmatism informed their literary endeavors. Realism was in many ways a reaction to and a movement away from romanticism, which had dominated French literature in the earlier part of the century. The romantic movement, an artistic and literary tradition established in late eighteenth-century Europe, had been characterized by an interest in nature and an emphasis on individualism, imagination, and emotion. Ultimately, realism became the dominant literary style until the end of the century.

Political and Social Influences in Nineteenth-Century France

The school of realism took shape in French literature after the coup d'etat in 1851 that brought Louis Napoleon to power. Louis Napoleon—the nephew of the Emperor Napoleon I (Napoleon Bonaparte), who had been forced to abdicate in 1815—had himself proclaimed emperor in 1852, and he ruled as Napoleon III until 1870. In many ways realism represented a reaction against the social climate of this period of the "Second Empire." While many people made fortunes in this developing capitalist society, the gap between rich and poor seemed to be widening. Meanwhile, wealth ruled, and the bourgeoisie, or entrepreneurial middle class, dominated society and politics. There was a general sense of self-satisfaction, even self-righteousness, among the wealthy classes. Prosperity, respectability, conformity, and order were strong mandates, both politically and socially. At the same time, there was dissension among the lower class: workers were unhappy with their treatment, and social revolution and political anarchy were brewing just below the surface.

The Catholic Church in Nineteenth- Century France

Although the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a strong position in France in the nineteenth century, its mandates were challenged by positivist philosophy. The invention of philosopher Auguste Comte, positivism rejected the romantic notions of dream, imagination, mysticism, and even God. Anything which could not be proved scientifically or seen with the eye was to be dismissed as whimsy; anything which was contingent upon faith was suspect. As a popular philosophy in French social and intellectual circles,

positivism thus threw the mandates of the Church into question. Many critics writing about "A Simple Heart" have remarked on the significant religious symbolism and criticism of the church and its followers. Certainly many of Félicité's attitudes appear to be grounded in her religion, and, as a servant to all and a peasant herself, she may represent the simple, uneducated, and religiously-observant class in nineteenth-century France.

Critical Overview

Although *Three Tales (Trois Contes)*, the collection which includes "A Simple Heart," was written more quickly than any of Flaubert's other known works, it is generally considered most exemplary of his mature style. Flaubert began writing the piece in 1875, attempting a more gentle and humanitarian literature, and he completed the three tales in 1877, just three years before his death. In 1878, in the *Fortnightly Review*, English critic George Saintsbury claimed that "A Simple Heart" "displays exactly the same qualities of minute and exact observation, the same unlimited fidelity of draughtsmanship, which distinguish *Madame Bovary* and *L'Education Sentimentale [Sentimental Education]*." Commenting on Flaubert's realism, Saintsbury remarked, "There are few things more curious than the combination of such an imagination with the photographic clearness of observation and reproduction."

The book's moral character, unlike that of *Madame Bovary*, has never been in question. The obscenity trial and notorious controversy surrounding the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1857 had had much to do with the "moral content" of that book, of course. But that controversy had also to do with Flaubert's realistic writing style; he was not a man given to inspiration and muses—he believed in working very hard and reporting what he saw. He believed in observation and faithful reproduction. That life was closely reproduced in *Madame Bovary* came as a shock to readers, and this bourgeois repugnance for self-examination showed even in the critical reports. Thus Saintsbury also writes of Flaubert that "he has to a very remarkable degree the art of chaining the attention even when the subject is a distasteful one to the reader."

Furthermore, although some critics at the time suggested that "A Simple Heart" was purely a moral tale, it is generally thought that Flaubert's intentions were, as he said, to write of a simple life, a simple woman. He was writing a tale of consolation rather than desolation, a more humanitarian literature, in response to requests from his old friend and fellow writer George Sand and in light of his own losses and growing empathy for human beings. Albert Thibaudet (in his *Gustave Flaubert, sa vie, ses romans, son style*) claims that this story heralds a true turning point in Flaubert's life and worldview, a turn toward human pity. Flaubert himself remarked in a letter that perhaps now he would be called humane. Claims about the moral bent of "A Simple Heart" have been largely set aside as less than central. If, according to Brunetière, "A Simple Heart" was simply another attack on human stu pidity and the bourgeoisie, how could a reader then explain Flaubert's mood of sympathy for Félicité?

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. According to critic Ben Stoltzfus (1961), "Flaubert's treatment of Félicité does represent an increasing sympathy and tolerance towards man, [but] he consciously and artistically had to use symbolism in order to inject his criticism of the church. This criticism is not Félicité's but his." Stoltzfus suggests a dual point of view—that of Flaubert and Félicité—so that readers are able to accept Flaubert's subliminal criticism of organized religion and the Roman Catholic Church because they become sympathetic to Félicité as victim. American critic Robert Denomme (in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 1970) agrees, saying that "whatever irony

emerges from "Un Coeur Simple" stems from the respective positions and attitudes of Flaubert and his readers who will evaluate both Félicité and the environment in which she has been compelled to function."

Other views, of course, vary: the story has been called a direct attack on the Roman Catholic Church of nineteenth-century France, and it has been hailed as a simple tale of human compassion. It has recently been suggested that, through the elimination of that which is masculine and violent, Flaubert in *Three Tales* affords his reader a hopeful vision identified with feminine nature. In her *Flaubert's Straight and Suspect Saints: The Unity of "Trois Contes*," Aimee Israel-Pelletier suggests that "Flaubert's 'swan song' is, ironically for a writer who has been so consistently characterized as a cynic and a hater of humanity, the most hopeful and, aesthetically, the most beautifully crafted of all his works." Whatever the differences, the critical and popular consensus has always held "A Simple Heart" as a profound and beautiful story.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Perret teaches English at Lake Forest College, in Lake Forest, Illinois. In the following essay, she examines "A Simple Heart" in terms of its portrayal of what was expected from a woman of the lower class in nineteenth-century France.

When Gustave Flaubert wrote to Madame Roger des Genettes that his aim in "A Simple Heart" was "to move, to bring tears to the eyes of the tenderhearted," he was explaining his intention to create in Félicité a sympathetic character—a central persona with whom we could identify and empathize. He claimed that his story was in no way ironic but rather "serious and extremely sad." And even when he describes "A Simple Heart" as "just an account of an obscure life, the life of a poor country girl who is pious but mystical, faithful without fuss, and tender as new bread," he must certainly have been sincere. It is speculated that, though "A Simple Heart" was the second tale written in the trilogy *Three Tales (Trois Contes)*, Flaubert chose to place it first in the collection because it was closest to his heart, most equal to his values at the time. Furthermore, some critics have suggested that the character of Félicité is modeled on a cherished maidservant, Julie, from Flaubert's childhood, although it is said that she was probably more intelligent and worldly than Félicité. He was also hoping to please his longtime friend George Sand, who had admonished him to create a literature of "consolation" rather than "desolation." In "A Simple Heart," then, Flaubert wished to compose a simple story about a good woman, and most critics agree that he did just that.

Still, there has been much controversy about the interpretation of the story. Ever since its publication and very fond reception in 1877, "A Simple Heart" has been variously interpreted. Some have seen it as a testimony to the futility of faith and religious dogma (witness Félicité's life of loss and exploitation despite her unquestioning love and devotion to all within her reach), particularly centering on the Roman Catholic church of nineteenthcentury France. Others take it as a simple declaration of faith in the human spirit and its undying capacity to love (witness again Félicité's unquestioning love and devotion to all within her reach and her steadfast refusal to give in to despair). Both of these readings can apply; in fact, Flaubert has left the ending of his story open to varied and even contradictory interpretations. Many feel that Félicité dies, smiling and with the vision of a giant parrot as Holy Ghost, believing her troubled life is being rewarded at last. Others interpret the delusion of the parrot during her final moments as suggestive of the utter and final misperception of a useless life. Neither of these interpretations, however, or anything one can imagine in between them, fully explains the story. A more complete understanding can be reached if we recognize that on a very fundamental level, "A Simple Heart" is the story of women in nineteenthcentury France. Viewed from this perspective, Félicité functions as a representative of female class and culture in a particular society. More universally, it can be argued, her character comprises traditional views and perceptions of female behavior and thought.

"She loves, simply and without second thoughts. The pattern of her life is therefore tragic, for she can neither stop herself from loving, nor ever be loved in return, since others see her as made of wood and functioning automatically," says Murray Sachs.

That she can be viewed as nothing but wooden, that she is simple, that she functions automatically, that she loves without measure or boundary: all of these qualities suggest archetypal female qualities. To be sure, Félicité is a woman of relentless love and compassion and empathy. When she witnesses the communion of Virginie, the young daughter of her mistress, she is moved beyond sympathetic tendencies to pure empathy:

When it was Virginie's turn, Félicité leant forward to see her, and in one of those imaginative flights born of real affection, it seemed to her that she herself was in the child's place. Virginie's face became her own, Virginie's dress clothed her, Virginie's heart was beating in her breast; and as she closed her eyes and opened her mouth, she almost fainted away.

In fact, critic Victor Brombert suggests that "vicarious experience goes hand in hand here with utter generosity and lack of self-awareness." Here again we find the exemplary female: complete empathy, complete selflessness, complete and unquestioning servitude to others. This is the story of a truly simple heart, a predictable soul, a female life.

Here is the story of a woman who, not despite but because of her obedience to the rules, worked for next to nothing, had no children, worshipped a dead, stuffed parrot, and yet lived a full life and was fully equipped to deal with loss and tragedy. She died smiling because she lived lovingly. She had stayed, as it were, within the lines, lived well within the expectations and dictates of her class and culture and, particularly, her gender. Thus we can speculate that, consciously or unconsciously, Gustave Flaubert has given us a tale that tells us as much about the simple expectations and constraints of gender as it tells us about God and organized religion.

That many have suggested a relationship between "A Simple Heart" and Flaubert's first, noto notorious, and controversial success, *Madame Bovary*, is neither surprising nor inaccurate. But readers find Emma Bovary unlikable or unsympathetic for the most part, whereas Félicité is, though uncomplicated, a sympathetic character. Critic Enid Starkie suggests that Félicité "has nothing to fight against and could be nothing but good." That there exists no temptation to sin, that there is no struggle in her between good and evil explains her purity and suggests a sharp contrast to the character of Emma Bovary. And of course Félicité has all of the qualities of Christian virtue, as critics suggest when they read the story as a critique of organized religion. It is not surprising, then, that she also embodies characteristics, virtues, if you will, frequently attached to the archetypal female: goodness, a pure and loving heart, self-abnegation, charity, and a simple, unselfconscious mentality.

"It is not particularly clear," says Starkie, "why [Flaubert] should have thought of writing 'A Simple Heart' at that moment, except that he wanted to compose a tale which was entirely kind and consoling, though it need not have dealt with a very unintelligent servant." The intimation that perhaps Flaubert could not make the equation of female goodness with intelligence also argues the contrast to Emma Bovary who, though stupid in action, is not unintelligent, and is also therefore not particularly "good" or sympathetic.

This, then, is key: the female characters in these stories exist on a sliding scale from good to evil which directly corresponds to their native intelligence and to their capacity for self-examination. By extrapolation, their "goodness" might also be said to correspond to their level of sexual experience. Virginie dies a virgin at a very young age, in a convent; Félicité dies innocent in almost every way; Madame Aubain, on the other hand, a widow with children, is cold and ungiving and unlikable. She even sends her children away, and, though this may have been the fashion, it contradicts maternal instinct. Emma Bovary, who is intelligent and imaginative, is also promiscuous, as well as expensive and dangerous to her husband and child; in fact, she finds her child ugly. ("It is strange," she thought, "how ugly that child is.") So innocence on any level (physical, sexual, intellectual or spiritual) corresponds to goodness in women, while knowledge— sexual or otherwise—corresponds to evil.

When Flaubert writes of "A Simple Heart" that it is not an ironic tale, rather "serious and extremely sad," he is suggesting a virtue in Félicité's innocence which exists exclusively because she is viewed, or misconstrued, as an ideal female. With no children or husband of her own, she is accessible and serviceable to all, and with no capacity for self-examination, she lives this way hap happily.

In fact, she outlives everyone she cares for, which is as it should be: the ideal woman everpresent, ever-loving, everlasting. Nobody's mother, she can be everyone's mother, chaste and good. So here is the story of a simple woman in nineteenth-century France who, by circumstance of her class and gender, lives an unexamined but pure and happy life. Viewed as such, Félicité's life, her reverence for the parrot Loulou, and her possibly blissful death are not so sad and serious. She is trapped by gender and she is a victim of circumstance, but she accepts her fate willingly. There is no contest between good and evil, no self-examination, and, in the end, no painful struggle with conscience or fear of death. Flaubert was indeed sincere when he said that this is not an ironic story, but rather "serious and extremely sad." For he intended no irony. But in order to create a perfectly sympathetic and, as he said, "good" woman, he found it necessary to make her simple and stupid. "Flaubert was so constituted that he was unable to see kindness and goodness in a sophisticated and intelligent human being," Enid Starkie concludes of Félicité's character. Nonetheless, this beautiful tale is profoundly moving and is considered one of Flaubert's most exemplary and heartfelt works. Félicité is, in spite of her representation as ideal female, never presented in a negative light, and she is thus an arguably sympathetic character.

In fact, even on a structural level, this story is the story of one woman and one woman only. We may call her stupid, but we like her, and this is Flaubert's tour de force. We like Félicité because she is good, but also because we understand why she sees the world as she does. We are allowed to see both inside and outside her character. This narrative device affords us a particularly poignant and comprehensive view of her life and her circumstances. We do not blame her, as we do Emma Bovary, for example, for her troubles. She is, after all, a good woman; who could blame her? Thus she is sympathetic to the end, when, as she dies, her beautiful female vitality ebbs and flows, "as a fountain sinks, an echo disappears." Perhaps her life was ridiculous; perhaps she was no more than a peripheral echo, like the utterances of her sacred parrot; but she

was good and in the end, real or not, she believed she was being rewarded. So here the story ends and must end, with the end of her life, and the conclusion of her point of view. It is here, finally and completely, that Flaubert shows us—by ending the story where he does—that this is a story about one woman and that, most importantly, her story has been worth telling. (In obvious contrast, *Madame Bovary* does not end with the death of Emma Bovary; rather the novel continues for many pages and ends, ironically, with Homais receiving the cross of the Legion of Honor.) In "A Simple Heart," Flaubert ends his narration with the humble and even beautiful death of Félicité, and in so doing he emphasizes finally the breadth and depth of her spiritual and moral integrity.

Source: Jacqueline Perret, Overview of "A Simple Heart," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Denommé argues that Flaubert's style in "A Simple Heart" leads the reader to feel sympathy with the main character despite her delusions.

Despite Flaubert's vigorous disclaimer to the contrary, a number of critics of recent vintage have been prompted to interpret " Un Coeur simple" as an ironic commentary on human stupidity and on stultifying bourgeois attitudes. Flaubert's writings prior to 1876, to be sure, virtually resound with pages of biting satire and bitter irony; *Madame Bovary, Salammbô* and *L'Education sentimentale* all attack virulently, at strategic intervals, the vacuity of many social, political and religious institutions. What distinguishes "Un Coeur simple" from the previously completed stories, however, is the discernible shift of tone and mood that the narrative assumes. Indeed, the remarkable fusion of tenderness with what Victor Brombert [in *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques,* 1966] so aptly terms "refined irony" produces an effect hitherto alien to the majority of the novelist's betterknown interpretations of humanity. This notable shift of emphasis may be at least partially explained by the series of unfortunate incidents that befell Flaubert from 1870 to 1876. The critical failures of *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* and *Le Candidat*, the deaths of his mother and of such friends as Louis Bouihlet, Sainte-Beuve, Louise Colet, and George Sand, and the serious financial difficulties he encountered all doubtlessly contributed in some manner in altering his literary vision and modifying his personal attitude. The resulting attenuation in mood and tone, far from emerging as the fitful and shortlived personal reaction to unfavorable circumstances, resulted rather from Flaubert's scrupulous attention to relevant details and his painstaking effort to obtain specific effects; he wrote to his niece, Caroline, on 1 July 1876: "Je lutte comme un forcené contre les difficultés de mon *Coeur simple*, qui augmentent de jour en jour" ["I am struggling like a madman with the difficulties of my 'Simple Heart,' which increase from day to day"]. Flaubert's modified vision of humanity reaches its culminating point in the unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, which illustrates, ironically, the intellectual pursuits and failures of two friends without ruthlessly exploiting or condemning them for their folly. Like the two male protagonists, Bouvard and Pécuchet, Félicité in "Un Coeur simple" ironically unveils the futility and fatuousness of specific bourgeois practices while enlisting at the same time the undeniable sympathy of the reader.

"Un Coeur simple" deliberately refrains from unleashing any direct assault upon the ineffectiveness of organized religion or the narrowness of intellect and attitude that characterizes the typical provincial bourgeois. That any such overt critical confrontation is avoided in the story is attributable to the fact that Flaubert abstains from resorting to his favorite technical device, the *style indirect libre* ["indirect discourse"], in order to fashion the portrait of his main character. The *style indirect libre*, a type of indirect discourse obtained through the momentary association between the consciousness of the character involved and the directing intelligence of the narrator, would have endowed the narrative with a tone radically different than the one achieved in "Un Coeur simple." It is more than likely that Flaubert, intent on portraying Félicité with sympathy and even tenderness, realized that such a technique, in this instance, would impair him

in achieving the desired effects. Félicité, unlike Emma Bovary, is incapable of formulating her thoughts or impressions on any appreciably precise or sophisticated level. The collaboration entered upon by Flaubert and Emma Bovary through the *style indirect libre* underscores with particular acuity the consciousness of his protagonist's state of mind, thus mercilessly exposing her to the reader's ridicule as the stupidly ironic victim of her own carefully contrived delusions. . . .

Flaubert's heroine in "Un Coeur simple" escapes the ignominy of such exposure primarily because she never experiences such complicated consciousness of her predicament. Moreover, her aspirations are too indelibly imprinted with simplicity and innocence for them to become so easily the brunt of the author's exploitation. . . .

There is no evidence of any compulsion to make of his simple-minded heroine an object for derision. To have exploited Félicité's simplicity in the manner that Catherine Leroux's stupidity was singled out in *Madame Bovary* would have reduced "Un Coeur simple" to a cynical commentary on fanaticism and ignorance. Such a single-minded interpretation robs Flaubert's story of its richer dimension.

Flaubert endows the heroine of his short story with the kind of homogeneous vision of reality that enables her to retain a remarkably even sense of composure in the face of tragedy and adversity. Félicité's simple view of life contrasts sharply with Flaubert's complex interpretation of reality. The latter's acute awareness of the complications and contradictions inherent in the world that he sought to comprehend inspired him with the voracious desire for understanding that is discernible in all his fiction. The confusion of change and movement, however, prevented him from pursuing such a goal with the kind of detachment he desired; the muchsought collaboration between his imagination and his practical intelligence never successfully took place, and the final homogeneity or synthesis failed to materialize to the extent that he had wished. Thwarted by the acknowledgment that complete truth remains elusive, Flaubert voiced his frustration as he reaffirmed his stubborn intention to pursue the impossible quest: "Car l'échec de la digestion n'empêche pas sa faim de le pousser vers de nouveaux objects: celle-ci s'exaspère au contraire de l'impossibilité qu'elle éprouve à se satisfaire" ["For a failure in digestion does not keep hunger from turning to new objects: my hunger is aggravated by the very obstacles it encounters"]. To a significant degree, *Madame Bovary* remains perhaps the author's most cogent statement on the sense of inadequacy resulting from the failure to fashion successfully a homogeneous world from an essentially heterogeneous one. Emma Bovary never succeeds in sustaining her illusory existence for any great length of time because she continually submits her somewhat deficient imaginative powers to the scrutiny of a sordid external reality. She repeatedly becomes aware of her self-deception until she is finally driven to her destruction. Ironically, Félicité, much more ignorant and certainly much less articulate than Emma, achieves a satisfying homogeneity of vision by transforming ordinary reality through her imagination alone.

Félicité's instinctive retreat into the more predictable world of her private imagination is in fact prompted by the overwhelming confusion and bewilderment she experiences when compelled to face the jarring complexities of external reality. . . . In her insecurity,

Félicité accepts Théodore's invitation to dance with him but is rudely shaken when she must resist his crude overtures. Thus, her subsequent withdrawal from the pressing requirements of a complex external reality appears as a defensive reaction to which she has recourse when she intuitively realizes that she is ill-equipped to function effectively under such circumstances. Henceforth, Félicité gazes at reality through her imagination and with her innate common sense. The real irony, of course, is that, despite her ignorance and simplemindedness, she not only manages to function adequately but she is able, unconsciously, to project her own world outwardly to the point of touching and affecting the lives of others.

Félicité's daily existence, like that of Emma Bovary, is defined by the same kind of boredom, disappointment, and discouragement that mar the security and serenity of an ordered life. Unlike Emma, however, Félicité preserves her equanimity: she proceeds with remarkable resilience to repair whatever havoc may have been wrought by personal tragedy, indifference, and even cruelty. Condemned to perform the simplest chores, she escapes from most of the ravages of boredom by lavishing her attention on others: Mme Aubain, Paul and Virginie, Victor, the père Colmiche and Loulou, the parrot. Of all the characters in "Un Coeur simple" it is Félicité who emerges most successfully in the battle against frustration through positive and durable activity. . . . Ultimately, it is Félicité's constructive attitude that allows her to escape the stultifying effects of an uninteresting existence, for like Emma Bovary and Mme Aubain, she is exposed to the same monotonous routine of provincial life. The protagonist of "Un Coeur simple" is exposed to the cruel indifference and callousness of society that in one instance nearly succeeds in unnerving her to the point of imbalance. Having suffered the ignominy of the mailcoach driver's whiplash, Félicité makes her way painfully to a summit that commands a view of Honfleur, and momentarily yields to Emma's temptation. . . . Fortunately, Félicité's nostalgia is short-lived; the gnawing memory of her misfortune doubtlessly is allowed to surface because of her semi-conscious physical and mental state at the time.

What is frequently conveyed in almost antithetical terms is the fact the Flaubert's heroine in "Un Coeur simple" differs so radically in attitude from his earlier protagonist, Emma Bovary. Flaubert shows Félicité actively resisting the stultification caused by monotony and by the slow, tragic passage of time. While it remains undeniable that the theme is established from the beginning and sustained throughout the narrative, it is interesting to note the coded and even somewhat ambiguous language in which it is cloaked. In *Madame Bovary*, the novelist's intended criticism of the deficient romantic personality and of the mechanized gentry is spelled out in more direct and explicit terms. Flaubert's novels understandably allow more importance to dialogue than do the short stories. In *Madame Bovary*, for example, the spoken language of the characters plays an important role in establishing the kind of private world in which they function. In such stories as "Un Coeur simple," where dialogue is reduced to a strict minimum, Flaubert has recourse rather to symbols in order to evoke or suggest the various attitudes that he intends to portray. It is no small irony that the older, and consequently more mature artist resorts in his later fiction to the utilization of an outwardly more subjective technique of presentation. The highly suggestive passages describing the rooms inhabited by Mme Aubain and the servant convey with effective symbolism the

opposing attitudes of immobility and activity, passive resignation and active resistance. . . .

The progressive shrinkage of Félicité's recognizable universe, brought about through the deaths of those she has loved, the eventual loss of part of the Aubain property and the subsequent impairment of her hearing and seeing faculties apparently condemn her to a life of virtually absolute isolation. Yet the opposite effect takes place. The isolation she experiences in a sense enables her to proceed u unhampered and uninhibited by external forces to fashion the kind of private, homogeneous world that brings about the solace and security that she seeks. As her solitude increases, the powers of her creative imagination also increase. What Victor Brombert calls "the perversion of the Logos" resembles in many ways the nature of the child-poet's vision. Like the child-poet, Félicité creates through her imagination a simplified universe in which the jarring dissonances of a complex external world are conspicuously absent. Félicité's hallucinations or willful distortions of reality are in no way identifi- able with the complicated malaise endured by Emma Bovary, Frédéric Moreau, and Mâtho. Flaubert's servant in "Un Coeur simple" succeeds in inducing the transformations that allow her to rectify the inequities of reality. This is how, for example, she is permitted to take part with Virginie in the first communion ceremonies. In similar fashion, Flaubert invites the reader to penetrate Félicité's imagination at Virginie's funeral procession. The faithful servant rectifies what she considers to be the arbitrary injustice of reality by her decision to mourn both Mme Aubain's deceased daughter and her own nephew, Victor: "Elle songeait à son neveu, et n'ayant pu lui rendre ces honneurs, avait un surcroît de tristesse, comme si on l'eût enterré avec l'autre" ["She thought of her nephew; and because she had not been able to pay these honours to him her grief was doubled, as though the one were being buried with the other"]. For the most part, Félicité emerges unscathed from her highly imaginative excursions precisely because she does not seek the corroboration of external reality in her experiences. Since she successfully maintains her own sense of equilibrium in the illusory world that she evolves, she never exposes herself to the destructive consciousness of self-deception and ridicule.

When deafness and virtual blindness finally condemn Félicité to the seclusion of the single room she occupies in the Aubain household, attended only by the mère Simon, she escapes progressively from the requirements of the heterogeneous external reality in which all individuals must learn to function. Old age and eventually illness free her from maintaining any kind of relationship with the harsh world of fact. Her mistaking Loulou for the Holy Spirit, indulgently dismissed as the ranting of delirium, conserves intact the illusions nourished by her imagination in more lucid intervals. Thus Félicité's spiritualization of Loulou achieves the status of a poetic metaphor for the Holy Spirit; as such, it emerges as one of the most exalted expressions of Hugo's romantic synthesis: the sublime residing in the grotesque.

What understandably disturbs the critics who persist in placing "Un Coeur simple" in the same ironic tradition established by Flaubert in his completed novels is that one might suspect a double viewpoint: Félicité grossly misinterprets religious dogma and so, logically, she should be victimized by her own delusions. Yet Félicité's illusory world, as limited as it may appear, provides her with experiences that are as rich and personally

satisfying as those of Emma Bovary are flimsy and ultimately corrosive. A comparison of Félicité's and Emma's death scenes verifies the positive value that is unfolded in the short story and the negation that is underscored in the novel. Emma's final agony is counterpointed by the ominous song of the blind man, whose words recall and comment on the dying woman's adulterous life:

—"L'Aveugle!" s'écria-t-elle. Et Emma se mit à rire, d'un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré, croyant voir la hideuse face du misérable, qui se dressait dans les ténèbres éternelles comme un épouvantement. [—"The blind man!" she cried. And Emma began to laugh, an atrocious, frantic, hopeless laugh, believing she saw the hideous face of that poor soul frightfully standing in the eternal shadows.]

In striking contrast, Félicité's dying moments are depicted as literally enshrined in the brilliant rays of a golden sun and, if anything, are counterpointed by the joyous religious ceremony of the Fête-Dieu, suggesting the triumphal apotheosis of the faithful servant and of her parrot. Among the variegated objects that magnetically attract the attention of the worshippers is the stuffed parrot, Loulou, transformed by his relationship to the expensive vases and colorful flowers that bedeck the altar on which they are placed: "Un sucrier de vermeil avait une couronne de violettes, des pendeloques en pierre d'Alençon brillaient sur la mousse, deux écrans chinois montraient leurs paysages. Loulou, caché sous des roses, ne laissait voir que son front bleu, pareil à une plaque de lapis" ["There was a silver-gilt sugar-basin with a crown of violets; pendants of Alençon stone glittered on the moss, and two Chinese screens displayed their landscapes. Loulou was hidden under roses, and showed nothing but his blue forehead, like a plaque of lapis lazuli"]. The very rhyming of the ceremony— the slow marching, the silence of the crowd, and the kneeling in reverent gesture&mdashacts as a parallel to the slowing beat of Félicité's dying heart. From her bed, she participates in the festivities: "Une vapeur d'azur monta dans la chambre de Félicité. Elle avança les narines, en la humant avec une sensualité mystique; puis ferma les paupières. Ses lèvres souriaient" ["An azure vapour rose up into Félicité's room. Her nostrils met it; she inhaled it sensuously, mystically; and then closed her eyes. Her lips smiled"]. When juxtaposed to the fatuous, pointless dialogue entered into by Homais and Bournisien in the room where Emma lies in state, the death scene of Félicité suggests a striking impression of harmony and respect. . . .

Source: Robert T. Denommé, "Félicité's View of Reality and the Nature of Flaubert's Irony in 'Un Coeur Simple'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 7, No. 4, Fall, 1970, pp. 573-81.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Madsen asserts that Flaubert provides a realistic depiction of the setting, incidents, and characters of "A Simple Heart." Madsen concludes by relating Flaubert's pessimistic realism and objective tone to his use of irony.

"Un Coeur Simple," published in 1877 in *Trois Contes*, is a work of Flaubert's maturity. In this realistic nouvelle about the disappointments and bereavements of a self-sacrificing, simple-hearted servant girl from Normandy, Flaubert has certainly not given up the pessimism which found such bitter expressions in *Madame Bovary*. But, in spite of the inclusion in "Un Coeur Simple" of at least one very painful episode, and the general depressing effect of the gradual "running down" of Félicité's life, the overall impression which the reader gets from the short story is not exclusively one of bitterness. Perhaps the tone of the work may be tentatively described as one of sad serenity or ironic resignation. Flaubert views his simple-minded main character and her peculiar deity with some irony; but at the same time he is fond enough of her to include in his narrative scenes which are, as we shall see, almost tenderly conceived. This all-inclusiveness (Félicité is viewed with objective realism, with gentle irony, and with unsentimental compassion) lends to the work a richness and mature complexity which are impressive.

That "Un Coeur Simple" is a realistic piece of work there is no mistaking. In the first place, the nouvelle is realistically conceived due to the fact that Flaubert, as so often before, took models in actual life for some of his characters. [In his *Flaubert, l'homme et l'oeuvre,* 1932, René Dumesnil observes] that Félicité has traits from a *fille-mère* called Léonie who served in Trouville and also from "mademoiselle Julie," an old faithful servant who worked for the Flaubert family for years. Dumesnil likewise calls attention to the probability that the characters of the two children Paul and Virginie were modelled on Flaubert himself as a child and his sister Caroline. Like Virginie in "Un Coeur Simple," Caroline died young. Even the notorious parrot Loulou had models in real life; Flaubert borrowed specimens, both a live and a stuffed one.

The milieu (*le cadre*) of the short story is realistically depicted throughout, both in the wider sense (the descriptions of the scenery of Normandy) and in the narrower sense (the descriptions of the house of Madame Aubain with the room of Félicité). Flaubert gives more attention, however, to the immediate environment, i.e. the house of Madame Aubain, than to rural Norman landscapes. An obvious reason for this would seem to be that Félicité, as the most important character, "stays put" most of the time. She is first of all a *servante*; applying the sociological terminology of [Honore de] Balzac, we might say that in a sense her character is moulded partly by the house of Madame Aubain, and that she perhaps, in her turn, helps to form it—its atmosphere.

The characters in "Un Coeur Simple," including the minor ones, are all described in realistic terms, but, despite the inclusion of some rather unpleasant physical details of illness and disease, not in naturalistic ones. One does not find in "Un Coeur Simple" such starkly naturalistic touches as the description of *L'Aveugle* and the scene of the

amputation of Hippolyte's leg in *Madame Bovary.* One should not, however, attempt to make too much of the difference of style between *Madame Bovary* and "Un Coeur Simple" (one is, after all, a fulllength novel in several types of style, the other a *nouvelle*) but, perhaps, it is worth noting here that "Un Coeur Simple" does show considerable realistic unity and consistency of style and tone.

As it was indicated above, the characters of the short story are conceived in realistic, even deterministic terms with inclusion, as in the case of illness and death, of reasonably unpleasant physical details. We must learn about Félicité, not only after her arrival at Madame Aubain's house, but also about her childhood: the death of her father and mother, her childhood suffering and loneliness; her disappointing love "affair," which, in a sense, accounts for ("determines") her later desperate clinging to other people and animals. Her emotional (and sexual) life is thwarted in the beginning of the story by the loss of her only love, Théodore, and her parents; but her craving to love is in no way impaired.

When the characters fall ill and die (and many of them do) we get the amount of physical and medical detail which Gustave Flaubert, the son of Doctor Flaubert, believes that good realism calls for. In all justice it must be admitted, however, that Flaubert shows admirable restraint in his enumerations of the symptoms of the several ailments that his characters suffer from. Still we get our details. Suffice it to list just a few of the many examples. At the deathbed of Virginie, Madame Aubain ". . . poussait des hoquets d'agonie" [". . . was choking with sobs of agony"]. The description of the dead Virginie goes like this: ". . . elle (Félicité) remarqua que la figure avait jauni, les lèvres bleuirent, le nez se pinçait, les yeux s'enfonçaient" [". . . she noticed that the face had grown yellow, the lips turned blue, the nose was sharper, and the eyes sunk in"]. Even illness of the parrot is observed closely and the appropriate realistic details are given: "Il devint malade, ne pouvait plus parler ni manger. C'était sous sa langue une épaisseur, comme en ont les poules quelquefois. Elle le guérit, en arrachant cette pellicule avec ses ongles" ["He fell ill and could not talk or eat any longer. There was a growth under his tongue, such as fowls have sometimes. She cured him by tearing the pellicle off with her fingernails"]. The characters in "Un Coeur Simple" do not, however, have to fall ill for Flaubert to describe them in realistic terms. At times his descriptions hover between the realistic and the naturalistic (the line of demarcation between the two is, of course, vague). When, at the death of Virginie, Madame Aubain breaks down and kisses Félicité, for the first and last time forgetting the difference in rank between mistress and servant, the reaction of Félicité is rendered in the following way: "Félicité lui en fut reconnaissante comme d'un bienfait, et désormais la chérit avec un dévouement bestial [my italics] et une vénération religieuse" [Félicité was as grateful as though she had received a favour, and cherished her mistress from that moment with the devotion of an animal and a religious worship"].

Worms, an unpleasantly realistic symbol of decay, play an important part in the narrative. Making a nostalgic survey of the dead Virginie's belongings, Madame Aubain and Félicité find a little hat, but ". . . il était tout mangé de vermine" ["it was eaten all over by moth"]. Nor does the sacred bird Loulou, or rather its physical incarnation,

escape the ravages of earthly decay: "Bien qu'il ne fût pas un cadavre, les vers le dévoraient . . ." ["Loulou was not a corpse, but the worms devoured him. . ."].

Among the characters of "Un Coeur Simple" Félicité is, of course, of paramount importance; the other characters are merely sketched in by Flaubert. They only interest us in their relations with the servant girl. Madame Aubain is simply Félicité's mistress. Paul and Virginie are merely children that are loved by Félicité. The nephew, Victor, is a young man mothered and later mourned by Félicité. Le père Colmiche is an old sick derelict nursed by Félicité and later prayed for by her. And the parrot Loulou, though it has a birdlike personality of its own, only compels our attention because it is loved by Félicité and becomes her God.

The admirable full-length portrait of the simple soul Félicité offers ample illustration of Flaubert's psychological insight, of his ability to render plausible the naïve workings of a mind entirely different from his own. As the title of the nouvelle indicates, Félicité's predominating characteristic is simplicity, combined with a self-effacing devotion to the ones she loves. The following would be a brief summary of the chief components of her character: She is devoutly religious, virtuous, hard-working, economical, efficient, deeply devoted to her mistress and the latter's children, humble to the point of effacing herself. She is ignorant about "bookish" things and the information derived from study (note her ignorance about geography, for instance). She is a muddled thinker, easily confused by irrelevant considerations, all, however, dictated by her great loyalty to others. Hurrying frantically to Virginie's deathbed, she is suddenly struck by the naïve, domestic fear that the house of Madame Aubain is left unprotected: "La cour n'était pas fermée! si des voleurs s'introduisaient?" ["The courtyard has not been shut up; supposing burglars got in!"] And so she forgets about Virginie for the moment and rushes back to protect the house, like a good servant.

Yet her simplicity is not absolute; it does not extend to the sphere of buying and selling. In bargaining with the tradesmen of Normandy, Félicité gives proof of the considerable practical astuteness of the Norman peasant. No butcher or grocer is going to cheat her! And invariably, when the tradesmen leave her, they are full of respect for her commercial talent and strength of will.

With regard to the realism of incident in "Un Coeur Simple," there is one episode which stands out from all the others in importance; it may almost be said to form the crux of the story. In the terrible scene of the deaf Félicité, on the road in front of the coach, struck down brutally by the whip of the driver, Flaubert focuses all the injustice and brutality that Félicité has suffered. Félicité's deafness and consequent failure to hear the approaching coach and get off the road in time is interpreted by the driver (understandably enough, perhaps, from his point of view, but otherwise, of course, quite erroneously) as spite or defiance; and so furiously he ". . . avec son grand fouet, lui cingla du ventre au chignon un tel coup qu'elle tomba sur le dos" ["gave her such a lash from waist to neck with his big whip that she fell on her back"]. And the coach, moving like "une trombe" ["a hurricane"] passes her by and leaves her bleeding and without understanding on the road. Continuing on her way toward Honfleur with the dead parrot, a little later she realizes the full impact of that terrible experience in a sort of delayed

chain reaction in which, in a flash of stupefied insight, all her previous miseries are telescoped into one overwhelming feeling of unbearable pain and defeat: "Alors une faiblesse l'arrêta; et la misère de son enfance, la déception du premier amour, le départ de son neveu, la mort de Virginie, comme les flots d'une marée, revinrent à la fois, et, lui montant à la gorge, l'étouffaient" ["Then a faintness overtook her and she stopped; her wretched childhood, the disillusion of her first love, her nephew's going away, and Virginie's death all came back to her at once like the waves of an oncoming tide, rose to her throat, and choked her"]. This episode is an extremely pessimistic and a very moving one; but it is rendered with the utmost composure by Flaubert, without a trace of sentimentality. In many ways it reminds one of the fate of Hippolyte in *Madame Bovary.* Félicité and Hippolyte are both the helpless victims of the callous, indifferent brutality of the world which crushes them, moving like "une trombe." Félicité is defenseless, in the scene discussed above, because of her deafness which she cannot help, and Hippolyte loses his leg because he is the gullible victim of the "scientific" vanity of Homais and the easily aroused, headless ambition of Charles Bovary.

As it has been indicated above, the tone of the narrative in "Un Coeur Simple" is one of great detachment and objectivity. But some readers would undoubtedly get the impression that a mild irony *vis-à-vis* Félicité and her original metaphysics disengages itself, so to speak, at the end of the story. If irony it is, it is a kind irony, however, not a malicious one like the one Flaubert employs in his satirical account of Emma Bovary's education. . . . But, readers might argue, after all a *parrot* is a somewhat grotesque symbol of the Holy Ghost, and if you make your main character lie on her deathbed blissfully viewing the Holy Ghost in the open heavens in the shape of a gigantic parrot hovering over her head, you might at least *seem* to be implying, ironically and bitterly, that all religion is nothing but delusion. And yet, as we shall see presently, Flaubert's attitude toward this last scene is not mainly ironic.

It is not only the description of Félicité's last moments which is susceptible of an ironic interpretation. The realistic juxtaposition of Félicité's agony and the progression of the quaint religious procession in Madame Aubain's courtyard is presented with a baffling detachment which would unquestionably seem ironic in intent to many readers. The scene is reminiscent of Flaubert's description of "les Comices" in *Madame Bovary*. As in that scene we have a skilful blending of most discordant elements (the love talk between Emma and Rodolphe; the lowing of the cattle; the pompous speech of the official), so in "Un Coeur Simple" Flaubert, in a perfectly realistic way, with impassive composure, arranges somewhat incompatible objects on the *reposoir:* ". . . et des choses rares tiraient les yeux. Un sucrier de vermeil avait une couronne de violettes, des pendeloques en pierres d'Alençon brillaient sur de la mousse, deux écrans chinois montraient leurs paysages. Loulou, caché sous des roses, ne laissait voir que son front bleu, pareil à une plaque de lapis" [". . . and some rare objects caught the eye. There was a silver-gilt sugar-basin with a crown of violets; pendants of Alençon stone glittered on the moss, and two Chinese screens displayed their landscapes. Loulou was hidden under roses, and showed nothing but his blue forehead, like a plaque of lapis lazuli"].

In conclusion one might ask the question: is "Un Coeur Simple" then, exclusively a bitter, pessimistic, ironic work? In his introduction to Trois Contes (Editions Variétés,

Avant-Propos, p. 9) René Ristelhueber seems to think so; he observes: "A la fois bref et minutieux, ce récit, sans un rayon de soleil, a quelque chose de poignant et d'amer" ["At once brief and detailed, this tale, without a ray of sun, has a poignant and bitter quality"]. We cannot agree with that. Nor can we, on the other hand, agree with Dumesnil, who remarks in his book on Flaubert: "Dans l'oeuvre de Flaubert, empreinte d'un pessimisme altier, 'Un Coeur Simple' apparaît comme un repos, comme une détente" ["In Flaubert's works, stamped with a proud pessimism, 'A Simple Heart' appears as a rest, as a relaxation"].

It would seem that a more correct critique of "Un Coeur Simple" must try to take account of both of these extreme points of view. We have noted the pessimism of the *nouvelle*, especially in the description of the painful scene of Félicité struck down by the driver, and in the general, cumulatively depressing effect of the "running down" of her life. It has been well said that for many of Flaubert's characters "la vie est une réalité qui se défait" ["life is a reality that self-destructs"]; and certainly the life of Félicité is a case in point. We have likewise noted the possible, but if so, gentle, irony of Félicité's peculiar metaphysics. But we must not forget the title of the work; we must not forget that Félicité is indeed a simple soul. And this is where Flaubert adds tenderness to his pessimistic realism and objectivity. Of all the persons and things which Félicité loved, the only thing which life permits her to keep is the stuffed, worm-eaten parrot. But her humility and great capacity for love find that a more than acceptable object of affection. Since she is devoutly religious, to a simple soul like hers there is nothing strange or irreverent in the fact that the Holy Ghost and the stuffed parrot should merge in her imagination: the thing she loves most in heaven linked to the thing she loves most on earth. If we may be permitted to combine and paraphrase two of the sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, we could say, with Flaubert we believe: Blessed are the poor in spirit and pure in heart, for they shall see (their) God.

Source: Borge Gedso Madsen, "Realism, Irony, and Compassion in Flaubert's 'Un Coeur Simple'," in *The French Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, February, 1954, pp. 253-58.

Topics for Further Study

Gustave Flaubert has been called the master of "Art for Art's Sake." Research the literary school of realism and the idea of "art for art's sake" and discuss "A Simple Heart" in those terms. You might choose to draw parallels to realism in the visual arts and sciences.

Flaubert, it is said, was attempting to write realistically, to report what he saw, and to write with the beautiful precision of the language of science. Discuss how a writer of literature can be said to resemble, in style, tone, rhythm, or diction, a composer of music or of a work of science.

Read *Madame Bovary* and discuss the various parallels between that novel and "A Simple Heart." In particular, examine the similarities and differences in the worldviews expressed in the two works.

"A Simple Heart" was originally entitled *Le Perroquet (The Parrot*). Discuss how each title suggests a different approach or meaning to the story.

Compare Félicité to the character Forrest Gump in the movie of the same name. Discuss some of the similarities and differences between the two works in terms of the points they make and how they make them.

What Do I Read Next?

The Awakening is author Kate Chopin's turn-ofthe- century masterpiece. Often compared to *Madame Bovary*, this short novel tackles some of the same issues that appear in Flaubert's work.

Candide (1759), by the French author Voltaire, is an earlier example of a work in which the experiences and perceptions of a naive character are used to produce an ironic commentary on society.

Winston Groom's 1986 novel *Forrest Gump* also uses the life of a naive and good-hearted protagonist to comment on the society of its time—in this case, that of the United States in the late twentieth century. The film adaptation, starring Tom Hanks, was released in 1994.

The Letters of Gustave Flaubert is translator and critic Francis Steegmuller's collection of Flaubert's correspondence during the later years of his life. Entertaining and informative, these letters offer a fascinating look at the author's life and times.

Madame Bovary, Gustave Flaubert's best known and most controversial novel, was the subject of an obscenity trial in 1857. The characters of Emma Bovary and Félicité make for interesting comparisons.

Three Tales, the collection from which "A Simple Heart" is taken, also contains the stories "The Legend of St. Julien l'Hospitalier" and "Herodias." It was the last work published during Flaubert's lifetime, and it was the one most quickly written. It is also interesting as a trilogy, as each tale has a successive relationship to the others.

Further Study

Steegmuller, Francis. Introduction to *Madame Bovary*, by Gustave Flaubert, The Modern Library, 1982. Steegmuller's comprehensive introduction is very helpful for comparison and contrast and for a general overview of Flaubert's work.

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Brombert, Victor. "'Un Coeur simple': Tenderness and Irony." In *The Novels of Flaubert: A Study of Themes and Techniques,* Princeton University Press, 1966, pp. 233-45. Sachs, Murray. "'A Simple Heart'." In *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* St. James Press, 1994, pp. 899-900. Starkie, Enid. *Flaubert the Master*, New York: Atheneum, 1971.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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