HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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A SIMPLE HEART / *Un coeur simple* (1877)

Gustave Flaubert

Un coeur simple Flaubert's *Un coeur simple* is a short story published in 1877, and to all appearances a serious break with Flaubert's earlier fictions and artifice pieces, like Bouvard and Pecuchet. Un coeur simple is a sharply chiseled studied picture of a single lady living out her life in Normandy in the nineteenth century, developing a small circle of friends, and in the end, inconspicuously, dying away.

In the end of course this story is simply about itself, and about the artifice it turns out being. For though this story has its own pathos, and though we feel the pinch of the human condition at every point in the tale, we remain even more struck by the artistry unfolding before us. For *Un coeur simple* is art that truly teds to be discovered.

Art that needs to be discovered? Ars est artem celare runs the Latin adage, art is all about hiding art, minimizing the appearance of artfulness. (Think about the nimble grace of a superb ballet dancer or ice skater. One can barely imagine the discıpline that lies behind such a performance.) We are here, in fact, onto a major insight of ancient Greek aesthetics, that there is a deep connection between harsh and rigorous discipline and the must succulent effects of beauty. Aristotle argued, in the Poetics that from the experience of suffering come wisdom and even the joy of art, pathei mathos. It was in fact the experience of ancient Greek drama as a whole that only the harsh in experience can generate the glistening. It is in fact the lesson of Flaubert's own fiction that the harsh and the refined generate each other. In Madame Bovary the splendors of fantasy and the female dream is tightly interwoven with the events of harsh death. and downfall which in the end wreak t heir fury on the fanciful Madame.

The negative, the faceless, the hurt qualify as candidates for greatness in Flaubert. He is always sensitive to the plight of the :housewife beleaguered by the pullulation of her own fantasies, of the young man, Frederick, torn apart by the new bourgeois social world into which he finds himself cast, or of the majestic lady, Salammbo, whom fate has rendered too grand for a commonplace resolution to life's problems.

The stratum of basic life problems, as Flaubert might plausibly see it, becomes apparent in the fields the streets, or in the kitchen, where the self-sustaining of our lives takes place. Here of course is where 'un coeur simple', a simple soul, becomes an archetpe of the human experience; an individual who 'stands for" the entire human condition. The simple soul of our text is both a nobody and a figure of human importance. We track her through several stages of the life experience.

From the beginning our 'coeur simple' is an anonymous woman in a village in nineteenth century Normandy. She is unmarried and works for a widow in the village. In that role she is widely admired for her housewifely skills--at cooking sewing and spinning--and is the envy of every woman in the village, who would love to have such an upright lady working for her. She is everybody's simple soul.

In 'subsequent panels we other faces of the lady's simple life--courted but abandoned, deprived by death of two beloved nephews, ultimately reduced to the companionships of a parrot and of death. A simple and loveable soul she remains to the end. a lasting example of the Flaubertian aesthetic, harsh grounds generate polished souls.