1. As a wife, mother, or lover, does Emma ever feel love? She believes that she loves Rodolphe and Leon, but to what degree should readers count that love as genuine? What is the true nature of her relationships? Does true love exist anywhere in the novel? If so, who experiences it? Does Charles's love count if it is not matched by his wife?
2. Trace the novel's treatment of fantasy versus reality through an analysis of Emma's and Charles's contrasting perspectives.
3. The novel opens with Charles being ridiculed by his peers, and the theme of public embarrassment continues to dominate the novel. Can someone be ashamed if the truth is not known? For instance, Emma's multiple affairs eventually humiliate her husband, but he is not embarrassed for a long time because he does not know what is going on. But Emma is extremely worried about public embarrassment even before most of the public knows that she should be ashamed. How do the fear of humiliation and the desire for public recognition (such as in the failed operation) affect our choices?
4. Does the novel make a strong statement about the powerlessness of women to define and direct their own lives, or is Emma's experience idiosyncratic? Is Emma's kind of resistance to her life circumstances worthy of emulation?
5. Flaubert encourages readers not only to sympathize with Emma's plight but also to maintain great contempt for her actions. To what degree is Emma a victim of others, herself, random circumstances, an unquenchable natural urge to be free, or a combination of factors?
6. Selfishness is pervasive throughout the novel. Considering the selfish actions and desires of Emma, Rodolphe, Leon, and Charles, what seems to be the source of selfishness? Do men and women express selfish desires differently? How can selflessness be sometimes selfish?
7. Charles and Rodolphe view Emma in patently opposite ways. As a novelist, how does Flaubert draw this contrast so effectively?
8. Discuss the attitude of Flaubert towards the middle-class society he is describing. Use illustrations from the novel to support your view.
9. Explain the use of contrast and irony in Madame Bovary.
10. Compare the characterizations of Homais and Bournisien. What do they each represent? What is Flaubert's reaction to them? Are they fairly portrayed?
11. Discuss the use of symbolism in Madame Bovary, giving examples from the text.
12. Discuss the fantasies that motivate Emma and cause her unhappiness. In what way are they unrealistic? What do they indicate about her personality? Do the kinds of problems that Emma suffered from still exist today, and if so, what media cater to the desires of people like her?
13. Analyze the structure of Madame Bovary as a novel, pointing out the major scenes, the relationships between incidents and characters, the use of theatrical techniques, and the overall dramatic form.
14. What are the conflicts in Madame Bovary? What types of conflict (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) are in the novel?
15. How does Flaubert use foils to illustrate the foibles of the lead characters Charles and Emma? What is his purpose in using this characterization?
16. What are some themes in the novel? How do they relate to the plot and characters?
17. What are some symbols in Madame Bovary? How do they relate to the plot and characters?
18. Is Emma consistent in her actions? Is she a fully developed character? How? Why?
19. “Style indirect libre” is where the novel is written in third-person, but uses the essence of first-person. Using three passages, demonstrate how Flaubert uses this style and why he chooses to do so.
20. What are the implications of the literary inspiration of Emma's dreams and desires? Is Flaubert condemning literature or is he hinting at deeper issues? How does Emma compare to characters like Don Quixote de la Mancha whose desires and actions are also affected by the literary works he read?
21. Emma is not the only character who distorts the truth in order to match a preconceived or ideal view of it. Show how two other characters also distort the truth in the novel to match their own preconceptions.
22. What is the meaning of Emma and Leon making love in a moving carriage? How does that characterize their relationship? In general, what is the meaning of the representation and description of rotating machines, such as carriages, Binet's lathe, the mill at the end of the story? What is the meaning of such devices in classical and medieval literature? What is Flaubert suggesting about industrial capitalism and the bourgeois spirit behind it? What is the fate of human beings living under such conditions?
23. What is the meaning of the blind beggar that so terrifies Emma? What is his position in society? What does his presence reveal about that society? What is the significance of Homais trying to cure the beggar and then, after the cure fails, vilifying and persecuting him? What does that reveal about Homais's character and intentions?
24. What is the significance of the young Berthe ending up working at the mill? How is that fate similar to or different from that of her mother? What forces seem to rule the destiny of people in the world depicted by Flaubert? Is there any possibility of happiness, freedom, or fulfillment in such circumstances?
25. According to Flaubert, what is a higher standard of judgment, beauty or morality? Where does truth fit in that assessment? Can aesthetics and ethics be reconciled on some plane? What role would truth play in that task? In that sense, what are the ultimate purposes of this novel?
26. How is the issue of adultery treated in the novel? Does Flaubert condemn it (as he claimed in his defense during the legal proceedings brought against him on charges of immorality)? Does he understand it? Is there any relation between Flaubert's narrative and the biblical story of Christ and the adulterous woman whom the crowd wanted to stone to death? How does the novel treat the morality of the middle classes? Does it consider it genuine and honest? Why or why not?
27. How essential is the setting to the story? Could the story have taken place anywhere else?