

# Age Differences in Responding to the Literary Character: Secondary School Pupils Vs. University Students

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## Abstract

In this paper, I propose a comparative analysis between the receptions of the same literary text by two categories of readers: secondary school pupils and university students.

**Today’s youth’s reading is essential for cultural development of contemporary society, and the interrelationship between the literary text and its readers needs special attention from each language and literature educator. In this paper, I propose a comparative analysis between the receptions of the same literary text by two categories of readers: secondary school pupils and university students.**

In this analysis, I perceive literature as a form of communication, which opens the receptors’ perception subtly, involving their imagination and creativity. In order for it to be, the story has to find its place in ourselves, because any literary work lives not (only) between the covers of a book, but in the readers’ imagination. After appropriating the work, the readers render it back to reality, by its effects on “real” life and by sharing the book values with the others. From this angle, I base my approach on perspectives on the empirical study of literature, which emphasize the idea that, besides the analysis of the literary critic, the reception of everyday readers also needs to be taken into consideration [1].

Another premise is that the analysis of the hypothetical reader needs to be completed by investigations on statistic readers, groups of real readers with identifiable social status [2].

Applying literary questionnaires focused on real readers’ reading is one of the most frequently techniques of investigating literary reception. In my analysis, I have investigated two groups of readers, 25 secondary school pupils from the “William Shakespeare Theoretical High School” in Timișoara and 25 students of the West University of Timișoara.

I have decided to apply literary questionnaires on reading *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, because I

consider this great love novel a book about reading as well. The book shows us how the main character, Emma Bovary, defines herself in relationship with the world she finds in her readings. The novel narrates Emma's adulterous story, based mainly on a communication rupture between she and her husband, the rural doctor Charles Bovary. Influenced by the romantic world of the popular novels she reads, Emma is looking for passionate love in two adulterous relationships, which also end in great disappointment. The fact that Charles does not appreciate the literary values in the same manner as Emma is a source of her sentimental detachment of him: "In Eugene Sue she studied descriptions of furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking in them imaginary satisfaction for her own desires. Even at table she had her book by her and turned over the pages *while Charles ate and talked to her* (my italics). [...] This was an existence outside that of all others, between heaven and earth, in the midst of storms, having something of the sublime. For the rest of the world it was lost, with no particular place and as if non-existent. The nearer things were, moreover, the more her thoughts turned away from them." (Part I, Chapter IX). [3]

**Although Charles' mother tried to make his son love reading, she is insensitive to romance literature and tries to forbid Emma's readings, considering that sort of literature a real poison.**

Emma shares the same reading strategies with Leon, a young student who will become her lover, and their first meeting at the inn "Lion d'Or" shows not only their common passions, but their involvement in literature reading:

"My wife doesn't care about it," said Charles; "although she has been advised to take exercise, she prefers always sitting in her room reading."

"Like me," replied Leon. "And indeed, what is better than to sit by one's fireside in the evening with a book, while the wind beats against the window and the lamp is burning?"

"What, indeed?" she said, fixing her large black eyes wide open upon him.

"One thinks of nothing," he continued; "the hours slip by. Motionless we traverse countries we fancy we see, and your thought, blinding with the fiction, playing with the details, follows the outline of the adventures. It mingles with the characters, and it seems as if it were yourself palpitating beneath their costumes."

"That is true! That is true?" she said.

"Has it ever happened to you," Leon went on, "to come across some vague idea of one's own in a book, some dim image that comes back to you from afar, and as the completest expression of your own slightest sentiment?"

"I have experienced it," she replied. (Part two, Chapter II) [3].

Analysing the real readers' reception of the book I am referring in my paper to different literary communities and the way that they read the same text. In many approaches to literary reception, the role of the "common" reader is also emphasized. Literature should not be regarded only from the canonical point of view, as the literary critic is not an unchallenged authority. **This is why I take into account the empirical approach on literary reception promoted by researchers from Canada** (like David S. Miall, Don Kuiken, Marissa Bortolussi etc. [4]), Italy (Aldo Nemesio) etc. and the previous theoretical directions of reader-response criticism (Stanley Fish [5], Norman Holland, David Bleich) and those of the aesthetics of reception (Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser) [6].

Analysing "real" (not hypothetical) communities of readers, I focus on two types of literary communities: pupils and students. Regarding the models of studying the reception, I have followed the method of literary reception questionnaire. I analyse how the same work is received by each interpretative community.

The questionnaire was based on the following questions:

1. Gender, age, group (job) – optional.
2. Who do you think that is guilty for the disaster at the end of the book (Emma, Charles, his parents, her father, her lovers, other characters, her readings, her education, the fate etc)?
3. Do you think that Emma can be “judged” for all the evils derived from her passion(s) or not? Why?
4. How did you follow the character’s evolution (with detachment/indifference, sympathy, contempt, disapproval, criticism etc)?
5. What do you think about the influence of her readings/cultural information on her evolution?
6. What do you think that is the message of the book? What can we learn from this book?
7. Can/should it have any influence on us?

Analysing the secondary school pupils’ reception of the novel (16-18 years old) I have noticed that the most of those who have read the book are female readers. Half of them have read the novel because they were asked at the school and half out of curiosity, as they have heard that it is a great novel. The book was not compulsory for all the pupils: it was studied at the course of World Literature and as it was an elective subject, only about half of the students attended it. So, the influence of the community is a stimulating one, as those who did not study the book heard about it from those who did. Curiosity is stronger in the teenagers, so about 25 of the students read the novel after having heard about it. About 50% liked the novel very much and the other half enjoyed its reading in a certain extent. 65% focus in reading on the character, while 35% are mainly interested in the narration and the social world in the novel. I have noticed the pupils’ tendency to interpret the narrative works in a moral way. I have observed that they prefer classical literature instead of the postmodern text. Many of their comments come from such a classic perception of life. 60% of the pupils think that Emma is responsible for the disaster in the end of the book, while 40% argue that not only Emma is “guilty”, but the social context as well. Only a few (about 15%) regard Emma with sympathy, about 30% feel sympathy in the beginning but then they disapprove her, 25% declare their contempt for the heroine, 20% disapprove her and 10% read the book with detachment. Therefore, I have noticed a rather critical attitude towards the character.

I consider what T. S. Eliot wrote in an essay entitled “The Experience of Literature” a premise for my considerations of the teenagers’ reading: “The fact that we read does not concern merely something called our *literary taste*, but [...] it affects directly, though only amongst many other influences, the whole of what we are. [...] Consider the adolescent reading of any person with some literary sensibility. Everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seductions of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of a poet. [...]” [7]. If a few students understood (I don’t use the term of “understanding” as meaning “comprehension”, but “sympathy”, “tolerance”) the character of Emma Bovary, they did in such a sympathetic manner.

While discussing the reader's identification with the character, a reference to Hans Robert Jauss' approach to the identification with the hero may be useful. In order to differentiate the levels of aesthetic identification, Hans Robert Jauss starts from the Aristotelian classification of the characters. In *Poetics*, 1148 a, characters can be represented either as better, or as worse, or like us. The fundamental disassociation between *admiring identification* and the *sympathetic one* corresponds to the contradiction between "better" and "like us". In Corneille's plays, for instance, the reader has admiring feelings for the hero and he lives an *admiring identification*: the hero of the play does not behave like a simple man. On the other hand, the reader feels compassion for Lessing's heroes; these characters are common people and the receptor can live a *sympathetic identification* [8].

By sympathetic identification the reader feels the character closer to him/her, understanding the hero by associating his actions with situations or feelings from his/her real life.

Of all secondary school pupils, one female reader distinguished herself for her sympathy with Emma Bovary. Suzy, the pseudonym of a teenage of 18 years in the 12th grade, read the book out of curiosity, as she saw a motion picture where the characters were talking about the novel. The fact that she read it during the summer holiday suggests her interest for the story. She finds the book very interesting because of its originality and nonconformist reported to the times of the publication. Unlike most of her colleagues she does not blame Emma for the disaster in the end of the novel, but the society of that period. She regards Emma with sympathy "because I have something of her personality"). If all the other colleagues think that Charles loves (more or less) Emma, she answers that question: "I don't know, I really don't know" – an answer which shows her questioning reading.

In the case of most adolescents' attitude towards Emma, I have noticed a negative identification with her, as the main character of Flaubert's novel is in opposition to their expectations. "I regard her with indignation, disapproval and contempt because she is the type of woman that I would not like to resemble." "I didn't like the book too much because I did not agree with the main character, Emma, who proves a bad personality."

Most of the pupils stress the influence of Emma's readings on her life. "She's influenced by the books in such a manner that she guides her life according to them." "They are a part of her." "They make her dream of another life and wish what she doesn't have." "They open her eye to what she does not have, increasing her frustration." "They make her unhappy." – I have quoted from the pupils' considerations. So, from the point of view of many of them the books had rather a negative influence on the character.

**As the collective tendency is to disapprove Emma Bovary, when I asked who their favourite character was, 30% answered Emma Bovary, and 60% had no favourite character in this book.**

**Emma was the favourite character "because I understand her" or, another answer, "because she is a complex character". Suzy is the single pupil who admitted that she identified herself with Emma, while the others did not identify with any character.**

According to the pupils the message of the book is: the individual can be destroyed by society; the novel shows us how people are; it reflects the complexity of the human being; it makes us search for happiness in what we have; love should be lived according to spontaneous feelings and not conceived and then lived.

70% think that the book has had no impact on them. According to the collective tendency to interpret the novel in a moral way, the reading has determined some of them to reflect on their own happiness. It has had a beneficial influence on Suzy, making her feel more confident in herself.

They think that we can learn from the novel to show the others what we expect from them; to search the happiness in what we have and to realize what we cannot have; we should not dream too much; we should

not see life as a tragedy; love is not like in books; the world is a big subjective puzzle and frustration occurs everywhere.

Another question that the pupils had to reflect on is “What is love according to the novel *Madame Bovary*?” “A sad thing, unavoidable, unique”, “a permanent obsession”, it is influenced by “media”, “there is love”, you can lose your head when you are in love; women expect more passion and involvement – are some of the answers.

In order to discuss the contrast individual – collective readings, I have also observed a group of university students (most of them female readers). 70% expressed their sympathy for the main female character. The value shared by all female readers and which supports their attitude is their view of love as a supreme value. 70% think that Emma cannot be “judged” for her facts and 80% agree with and understand her acts. While explaining the individual attitude towards the character’s facts, each reader has different arguments – for instance: “Emma is searching for the great love”; “she’s looking for fun as she’s bored of normal life”; “she has a teenage attitude”; “she behaves like a child, but she deserves happiness”. Every reader presents Emma’s acts through a personal interpretation (as those quoted at random above). But what relates all the interpretations and constructs a group meaning is the belief in the values of love. The limitation of the individual reading is that it presents the story related to the reader’s personal life experience and the effect of the work on a single subjectivity. Collecting all the interpretations we can find the common idea: here the belief in love.

Unlike the secondary school pupils, the college students have better feelings for Emma Bovary: about 55% regard her with sympathy and understanding; about 35% express their disapproval or contempt, and the rest show detachment towards her thoughts and actions.

Another example that illustrates the difference between individual and collective reading and shows what issues supports a certain common interpretation is the analysis of the relationship between husband and wife in a certain narrative context. The readers have to read a fragment that presents a talk at a dinner with four participants Emma, Charles (the wife and the husband) and two persons whom they have just met (Homais and Leon) – part two, chapter two. The readers have to say how they find the relationship between the members (as referring to that fragment) of the married couple. The young readers (almost 100%) have found the relationship cold, formal, not sincere, while 70% of the mature readers have found it “normal”. In spite of the different remarks about the relationship in this couple (as reflected in this conversation, not in the whole book), all the young readers based their reading on the idea that marriage means a form of full communication and of happiness. The mature readers found the relationship expressed during the dinner conversation normal, because they share a different perspective of marriage.

**The first conclusion of my paper is that readers of different ages read the novel in a different manner and show a different attitude towards the character: see the pupils’ and the students’ (of different ages) attitudes. The different visions of marriage discussed in this article also suggest a difference of reading.** A question is if the pupils will change their attitude later. I think that as they get more reading (or life) experience it might happen. Another conclusion is that the reading experience influences our attitude towards the character and usually more experienced readers (those who read more) have a complex vision of the character and do not limit their interpretation to the moral aspect of the novel.

The younger communities (teenagers) show open attitudes towards the character and subject (they whether like or dislike Emma Bovary and what she does), while mature communities regard the text as a reflection of the complexity of life. There are also common paths of reading, as the most of the readers (whatever community they belong to) focus on the erotic course of the novel.

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