

# Eros and Thanatos: Psychological Perspectives on *Madame Bovary* and *The Butcher's Wife*

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## SUMMARY

Here two "feminist" novels from very different cultures--Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife*--are compared by means of a Freudian perspective. Freud's id or pleasure principle has a dual form: the synthesizing life-instincts of self-preservation, tied to sexual pleasure, and the disintegrating death instincts which lead to self-destruction. In Flaubert's novel Emma Bovary's needs are both spiritual ("romantic") and sexual, but through the stages of her disillusionment she is reduced to a self-destructive sexual animal; that is, her destructive tendencies overwhelm her rational self and she commits suicide. Lin Shi, the butcher's wife of Li Ang's novel, is on the other hand the innocent victim of her pig-like husband, himself a creature of raw sexual desire who inflicts pain on his wife in the act of love-making. Unlike Emma Bovary, Lin Shi has no chance to connect sex with pleasure or love. Thus Lin Shi is led by her life-preserving instincts to destroy the husband--butchering him like a pig--who is destroying her; she however must pay for this crime with her life. In both novels we may conclude that Thanatos has triumphed over Eros.

**KEY WORDS**

id

thanatos

self-destruction

self-actualization

rational

eros

self-preservation

libido

instincts

feminist



Interdisciplinary approaches to national and comparative literatures consider disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, history, or anthropology (among others), which are "external" to the literary works and have consequent limitations and advantages. Interdisciplinary approaches may ignore the holistic cultural context of a national literature in a focus on one approach like psychology. When a single interdisciplinary approach dominates—for example, a Freudian psychological methodology—the peculiarities of a national literature can be glossed over. On the other hand, interdisciplinary approaches to national literatures can transcend parochial interpretations and can open national literatures to a worldwide audience. Using interdisciplinary approaches in comparing literary works can provide insights that universalize literary works and offer new modes of comparison across national boundaries; in fact, widely divergent literary works and cultures can be analyzed by adopting such approaches.

Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife (Sha Fu)*, a 1983 novel, while part of the national literature of the Republic of China, can be compared to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, using a psychological approach and feminist perspectives. The female protagonists of these novels suffer a confused self-image and live with husbands they do not love. In a Rogerian sense, their personalities need to evolve. In a Freudian sense, they need to deal with their sexual identities and with life and death instincts (Eros and Thanatos). Lin Shi, Li's heroine, is trapped in a loveless marriage to a bestial pig butcher. The novel, set

in Lucheng, Taiwan, deals with Lin Shi's murder of her husband and her subsequent persecution by her society. Emma Bovary, Flaubert's nineteenth-century French character, betrays her bourgeois doctor husband, in her quest for love and self-fulfillment, while he continues to love her even after her death. Although both novels represent their own traditions and values--*The Butcher's Wife* depicting Chinese society and its beliefs regarding marriage, and *Madame Bovary* depicting French culture and its mores--by virtue of an interdisciplinary psychological approach, these works can be compared on the basis of their heroine's struggles for self-identity, sexual repression and expression, and conflicts with their spouses and societies.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) portrays a French peasant woman, Emma, who marries a country doctor and subsequently takes two lovers. Abandoned by her lovers and beset by debts she cannot repay, she poisons herself and dies. According to Rene Wellek, Emma Bovary is "a female Don Quixote, corrupted by sentimental reading, caught in a trap of circumstance, pitiful and to be pitied in her horrible self-inflicted death."<sup>1</sup>

Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* recounts the plight of Lin Shi, a poor Taiwanese village woman who marries Chen Jiangshui, a ruthless pig butcher. In her preface the author says she started with feminist ideals to illustrate the sad fate that befalls the economically dependent Taiwanese woman subject to the rules of traditional Chinese society.<sup>2</sup> However, the author soon finds herself embroiled with human issues such as hunger, death, and sex.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the protagonist undergoes beatings, starvation, and continual rape at the hands of her husband, whom she finally murders.

Universal needs and motivations undergird both novels. The life-death / Eros-Thanatos oppositions described by Sigmund Freud apply to the thematic and structural schema of these stories. The id, or pleasure principle, strives to satisfy

human needs, thus motivating people to gratify their needs. Id impulses have two forms: life instincts leading to self-preservation and sexual pleasure and death instincts involving self-destruction (the latter may take the form of aggression). Freud observes that:

The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus—in short to bind together; the aim of the second, on the contrary, is to undo connections and so destroy things. We may suppose that the final aim of the destructive instinct is to reduce living things to an inorganic state. For this reason we also call it the death instinct.<sup>4</sup>

In *Madame Bovary* and *The Butcher's Wife*, the female protagonists attempt to satisfy elemental needs, that is, life instincts, but ultimately death instincts prevail, leading to the destruction of these women. Through a psychological reading of these novels, which are highly divergent in terms of time, place, and culture, certain commonalities of motivation and behavior (and its consequences) can be analyzed and compared. What commonalities and comparisons can we discern between a nineteenth-century French provincial novel and a twentieth-century Taiwanese tale? At first glance, we might respond, "None." However, using a psychological approach allows us to treat these disparate works from a perspective outside of cultural, linguistic, and time-specific diversity.

Flaubert's Emma is caught in an unfortunate marriage with Charles Bovary, a simple but stupid doctor, who does not understand her needs. Although Charles loves and indulges her, he fails to awaken her sexually or romantically. Consequently, Emma tries to achieve her dream of romantic love outside of marriage. Bored with her husband,

Au fond de son âme, cependant, elle attendrait un

événement. Comme les matelots en détresse, elle promenait sur la solitude de sa vie des yeux désespérés, cherchant au loin quelque voile blanche dans les brumes de l'horizon.

All the while, however, she was waiting in her heart for something to happen. Like shipwrecked sailors, she turned despairing eyes upon the solitude of her life, seeking afar some white sail in the mists of the horizon.<sup>5</sup>

Continually fueling her imagination,

elle enviait les existences tumultueuses, les nuits masquées, les insolent plaisirs avec tous les éperduments qu'elle ne connaissait pas et qu'ils devaient donner.

She longed for lives of adventure, for masked balls, for shameless pleasures that were bound, she thought, to initiate her to ecstasies she had not yet experienced.<sup>6</sup>

Although Emma's elemental needs of food and shelter are met by her husband, she desires the special love and fulfillment she cannot experience with Charles. Therefore, she seeks satisfaction with extramarital partners, and she acts upon her repressed sexuality.

Spending her days in idle amusements to ward off boredom, she falls readily in love with Rodolphe, a landowner, who decides she is ripe for a love affair. Emma's illicit affair brings her "ecstasy" and "delirium." Once sure of her, Rodolphe tires of her love. With the demise of her affair with Rodolphe, Emma sheds her illusions:

Quel bonheur dans ce temps-là! quelle liberté! quel espoir! quelle abondance d'illusions! Il n'en restait plus maintenant! Elle en avait dépensé à toutes les aventures de son âme, par toutes les conditions successives, dans la virginité, dans le mariage et dans

l'amour;-les perdant ainsi continuellement le long de sa vie, comme un voyageur qui laisse quelque chose de sa richesse à toutes les auberges de la route.

What happiness she had known at that time, what freedom, what hope! What a wealth of illusions! It was all gone now. She had lost them one by one, at every stage in the growth of her soul, in the succession of her conditions; maidenhood, marriage and shoes—shedding them along her path like a traveller who leaves something of his wealth at every inn along the road.<sup>8</sup>

Emma achieves full maturity through her adultery—The Eros / life-seeking instinct of pleasure and sex helps her to attain a measure of self-actualization as she moves upwards through Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>9</sup> but also arrives at a state of disillusionment.

When Rodolphe abandons her, Emma falls ill with brain fever, and Charles nurses her back to health. Léon, a young lawyer, succeeds Rodolphe as Emma's second lover. As a result of her affair, Emma looks upon Charles with disdain because he seems weak and insignificant. Yet with Léon she fails to attain complete happiness:

Rien, d'ailleurs, ne valait la peine d'une recherche; tout mentait! Chaque sourire cachait un bâillement d'ennui, chaque joie une malédiction, tout plaisir son dégout, et les meilleurs baisers ne vous laissaient sur la lèvre qu'une irréalisable envie d'une volupté plus haute. Besides, nothing was worth the trouble of seeking it; everything was a lie. Every smile concealed a yawn of boredom, every joy a curse, every pleasure its own disgust, and the sweet kisses left upon your lips only the unattainable desire for a greater delight.<sup>10</sup>

Léon tires of Emma and wishes to rid himself of her.

Ironically, "she was as sick of him as he was weary of her. Emma found again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage" ("Emma retrouvait dans l'adultère toutes les platitudes du mariage")."<sup>11</sup>

Because of her habit of borrowing money from Lheureux, she ends by owing a small fortune, and a judgment is sought against her. Neither Léon nor Rodolphe helps her when she asks for money. In despair, she swallows arsenic, dying a horrible death. When the grieving doctor discovers her love letters and learns of her infidelities, he becomes even more despondent. He dies of no apparent physical cause. The child Berthe goes to live with a poor aunt who sends her to a cotton mill to work. As a consequence of her misadventures and suicide, Emma is responsible for ruining her family's finances and her daughter's future and causing her husband to die of a broken heart.

Initially, Emma is motivated to seek love and happiness outside of marriage. Charles Baudelaire thinks Emma is like "an ideal man" because she finds pleasure in life and is sensual.<sup>12</sup> As readers, we see Emma's discontent with her husband's stupidity as an attempt to emancipate herself. In feminist terms, she tries to gain independence from male domination, and she tries to take charge of her life. She dares to be sexually free. Yet in the final analysis, Emma's quest for self-fulfillment falls flat. She is caught by her sentimentality and unrealistic perceptions: "She married an excessively stupid and insensitive man; she met two callous lovers; she is tricked by a merciless usurer; she is utterly alone at last."<sup>13</sup> Emma cannot escape the conditions of her life. Neither of her lovers will irrevocably challenge society's strictures and run off with her. Because of her love of luxuries, she dangerously overspends, ignoring the interest due on her loans, and she brings financial ruin upon herself and her family. Her suicide is the direct cause of Charles's death, and she leaves her daughter a pauper. Emma's search for love, pleasure, and

fulfillment is flawed; it leads to her destruction and that of her family. As Carl Rogers notes, a fully functioning person is one who self-actualizes, who accepts self and others and is efficient in perceiving reality, but Emma, who while searching for self-actualization exhibits libido, or life instincts, is ineffectual in perceiving reality.<sup>14</sup> As a result of her two unfortunate love affairs and overpowering debts, she moves from Eros to Thanatos; her destructive tendencies overwhelm her rational self, and she commits suicide.

Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* depicts Lin Shi, a young peasant woman, who lives in circumstances much less fortunate than Emma's. While Emma's husband is a bourgeois doctor who loves her, the pig butcher is a crude, violent man who treats his wife like a sex object. Charles Bovary does not satisfy his wife's idea of romantic love, yet he does not oppress or brutalize her like the pig butcher. Chen Jiangshui, like Emma, is unfaithful to his spouse, seeking excitement outside of marriage. As Lin Shi toils at her daily tasks, Emma enjoys a life replete with varied social interactions and opportunities and eschews household labor. In economic terms, Lin Shi is better off than many village women because her husband provides her with decent food and shelter. Compared to Emma, she occupies a lower socioeconomic status. Lin Shi's mother, a widow, because of hunger disgraced her family by exchanging sex with a soldier for two rice balls. Her shameful conduct and suspected suicide cast a shadow upon her daughter's reputation.

From the standpoint of cultural standards, Lin Shi is treated like property. As a poor, parentless young woman, whose marriage is negotiated by her family, she is "owned" by Chen Jiangshui. According to Ying-Ying Chien,

Under the Confucian ideal of the "three obediences" and "four virtues," women were confined to the home and their duties were to serve and be submissive. With low

social and legal status, they were viewed as sex objects--bearers of sons and helpers to the husbands. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Like her mother who traded sex for food, Lin Shi is sexually exploited and legally raped by her husband. She emerges as a victim to his brutal instincts. Although her primary needs of food and shelter are provided for, on higher scales of needs (such as self-actualization or esteem), she appears dehumanized and passive. Eros--the life-preserving instinct--motivates her to stay alive. In order to eat and to have shelter, Lin Shi suffers Chen Jiangshui's sadistic treatment, but she is unfulfilled as a person.

Lin Shi's identification with her mother negatively influences her life. As a child, she remembers her mother clothed in a red dress, tied to a pillar, after being caught having sex with the soldier. In a dream she sees darkened pillars oozing "dark red blood."<sup>16</sup> The dream reveals the likely death of her mother and the soldier. Repeated references to her mother throughout the novel reinforce the concept of the protagonist as a sexual victim like her mother.

Hunger/food, sex/death, and pig images link and interchange within the novel. Chen Jiangshui slaughters pigs by trade, yet he is linked with his victims: he has "pig-eyes": "small beady eyes . . . sunk deep into a swelling of flesh around the eyes."<sup>17</sup> Lin Shi is piglike as the abused victim, for her husband makes her "howl in pain beneath him" whenever he has sex with her.<sup>18</sup> On her wedding day, Lin Shi's "pitiful screams" sound like ghostly pigs bleating, reminiscent of the many pigs Chen Jiangshui has slaughtered: Lin Shi herself becomes a piglike victim. Chen Jiangshui stuffs her with pork fat that "oozed out of the corners of her mouth and dribbled down in rivulets to her chin and neck, all greasy and wet."<sup>19</sup> Sex and food are often linked in the novel and remind us of the need of Lin Shi's mother to eat as a prelude to sex.

Since Lin Shi is young and inexperienced, she accepts her

husband's treatment as normal. Because she believes that sexual abuse is part of marriage, she enjoys neither sex nor love and becomes a sexual victim. Unlike Emma who reaches out for real love and achieves passion and a measure of sexual freedom, Lin Shi fails to connect sex with pleasure or love. Rather, for her, sexual relations are equated with excruciating pain. When Auntie Ah-wang, a local gossip, jeers because Lin Shi screams while making love, the young wife resolves to stop moaning: "She bit down on her lower lip so hard that she broke the skin, and blood seeped into her mouth--salty, brackish blood."<sup>20</sup> The protagonist's ensuing silence infuriates the pig butcher who rapes her during her menstrual period, portending bad luck. He brings home a pig's head as an offering to the ghosts during the Dead Souls' Festival.

Blood becomes an omen of impending destruction. The menstrual blood of Lin Shi dovetails with the blood of her ducklings. Chen Jiangshui, out of control, kills the ducklings to spite his wife: "There, scattered all over the bed of straw were the broken carcasses of her ducklings--head, bodies, feet, necks--all oozing blood."<sup>21</sup> Then he kills a pregnant sow by mistake and its aborted piglets make him fearful of retribution. Lin Shi, shocked by the death of her ducklings, begins to change. No longer does she fear her husband. She refuses to moan like a whore during sexual relations, causing the pig butcher to refuse her food. Again, food and sex are linked. Lin Shi survives by stealing food from the household. She eats the noodles intended for sacrifice to the hanging ghost and then worries about evil spirits and bad luck.

In order to eat, Lin Shi searches for work unsuccessfully. Chen Jiangshui offers her a job in the slaughterhouse cleaning pig entrails. He disembowels a pig and hands her the warm organs and intestines. Thinking at first that she had entered a "dreamworld," she awakens to reality and then faints.

From this point on in the novel, Lin Shi loses her grip on reality. She becomes incoherent and crazed after the slaughter-

house incident. She begs for coins in the street in order to offer a sacrifice to her mother who was raped and who committed suicide by jumping down a well.<sup>22</sup> Now Lin Shi strongly identifies with her mother. Looking as pale as a ghost, she warns Chen Jiangshui not to "fuck" her mother.<sup>23</sup> After he rapes her, Lin Shi knifes him in a dreamlike state and disembowels him like a pig: "Then it was a squealing, struggling pig with a butcher's knife buried at an angle in its gullet, buckets of dark red blood gushing from the wound, the animal's body wracked with convulsions."<sup>24</sup> Here Lin Shi butchers the butcher. She scoops out his intestines, decapitates him, and chops up the body, offering bowls of food as sacrifice. She eats of him as well.

Because she cannot change her marital situation and her surroundings, Lin Shi concentrates upon surviving an abusive husband and warding off hunger. Until the incident in the slaughterhouse, she manages to keep a precarious balance in her relationship with her spouse. Life-preserving instincts motivate her to maintain this balance so that she can survive. However, in the slaughterhouse the protagonist snaps. She is unable to distinguish between reality and irreality--life and dream. The constant anxiety she has endured now places her self in a state of disorganization.<sup>25</sup> Her sufferings and hunger deprivation drive her to the destruction of her tormentor and herself.

Like Emma Bovary's, Lin Shi's life ends with a self-destructive act. She murders her husband in a gesture of desperate freedom. Through killing, she attains a measure of self-actualization because she defies her husband and her society. Even though murdering the butcher is justified, because of cultural prejudice she is condemned to death. In her society the woman is presumed guilty of adultery if she murders her husband. Like the character alluded to by Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, where an aunt jumps into a well and kills herself after bearing an illegitimate child and

pollutes the family's drinking water,<sup>26</sup> Lin Shi wreaks her revenge upon the pig butcher at the cost of her own life; she also emulates her mother's example by jumping figuratively down a well.

Using an interdisciplinary approach allows the reader or critic to compare these highly divergent novels of East and West from a psychological perspective and to avoid some of the limitations of the national literatures. The vagaries of cultural, linguistic and time-bound criticism can be surmounted by the Freudian themes of Eros and Thanatos that help to explain the heroines' behavior. While Lin Shi is concerned about satiating her hunger and fulfilling her wifely duties in order to survive her abusive spouse, Emma looks for love and romantic excitement. Her actions are more deliberate and calculating than Lin Shi's, for she conceals her love affairs and her debts with considerable detail and planning. Thus Emma is the more fully developed personality. Even though life-sustaining instincts inform the women's actions at first, death-seeking instincts take over and drive the protagonists to their desperate actions. Since Emma finds no solace in her lovers, husband, child, or acquaintances, she commits suicide. Her downfall results from her previous unrealistic perceptions of her situation. On the other hand, Lin Shi acts at a lower level of awareness and sophistication than Emma. She has no knowledge of real love, and she equates sex with pain and suffering. She kills her husband as an act of revenge for his wrongs against her and her mother. While Lin Shi's personality development is limited, compared to Emma's, she grows when she resists Chen Jiangshui by refusing to moan when making love and by cleverly finding food when he withholds it, and entrepreneurial skills when she decides to raise ducklings to earn some money. Finally, her most daring act is her butchering of the butcher. Ironically, when she murders Chen Jiangshui and she frees herself of his presence, in achieving her highest level of development, she concurrent-

ly sets the stage for her own condemnation. For both protagonists death instincts prevail over the Eros instincts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek, ed., "Introduction," *Masterpieces of Nineteenth Century Realism and Naturalism*, in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, Vol. 2, eds. Maynard Mack et al (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979) 715.

<sup>2</sup> Li Ang, *The Butcher's Wife*, trans. Howard Goldblatt and Ellen Yeung (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1986), p. iv. The Chinese version is *Sha Fu* [ 殺夫 ] (Taipei: *United Daily News*, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London; New York: W.W. Norton, 1949) 19ff.

<sup>5</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Félicien Marceau (Paris: Éditions Gallimard et Librairie Générale Française, 1961) 84. The English version is *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, ed. Maynard Mack et al (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979) 784.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 89; 788.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 198; 857.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 209; 864.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham T. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1970) 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Madame Bovary*, 336; 946.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 343; 951.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Madame Bovary", Flaubert: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964) 94.

<sup>13</sup> Wellek, 716.

<sup>14</sup> Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier, *Perspectives on Personality* (Boston: Allyn and Beacon, Inc., 1988) 306.

<sup>15</sup> Ying-Ying Chien, "Sexuality and Power: A Feminist Reading of *Chin P'ing Mei*," *Tamkang Review* 19, 1-4, 611.

<sup>16</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*. p. 10; *Sha Fu*, 10. . . . 濃紅顏色的血。

<sup>17</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, p. 12; *Sha Fu*, 12. . . . 豬眼 ……… 一雙小眼睛 ……… 沉沉陷到眼眶周圍浮腫的肉裡。

<sup>18</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, p. 20; *Sha Fu*, 20.... 在他下面號叫 ………

<sup>19</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, 13; *Sha Fu* 13 ,.... 肥油還溢出嘴角，串串延滴到下顎，脖子處，油濕。

<sup>20</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, p.106; *Sha Fu*, 106 .... (她) 死命的以上牙咬住下唇，咬嚙出一道道齒痕，血滴滴的流出，滲化在嘴中，鹹鹹的腥氣。

<sup>21</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, 120; *Sha Fu*, 120 ……… 橫枕在稻草上一片四散的鴨屍，一塊塊的頭、身體、腳、脖子，仍有血液陣陣流出。

<sup>22</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, 135.

<sup>23</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> *The Butcher's Wife*, 138; *Sha Fu*, 138 .... 再一閃是一頭叫掙扎的豬仔，喉口處斜插著一(把)豬刀，大股的濃血鮮血不斷的由缺口處噴湧出，渾身痙攣的顫動著。

<sup>25</sup> Carver and Scheier, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 13.

