A Simple Heart

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Gustave Flaubert was born in Rouen, France, where his father worked as a surgeon at the local hospital. During his youth, he was fascinated by literature but reportedly not very committed to his studies. When Flaubert was a teenager, he met and fell in love with an older woman named Eliza Schlésinger, who would inspire his first notable piece of writing: *Memoirs of a Madman*. In 1841, Flaubert entered law school in Paris, but left due to his debilitating seizures and general lack of affection for the city city. Flaubert's seizures would affect him for the rest of his life and cause him to spend a great deal of time at home, but he was nonetheless able to spend many months of his young adulthood traveling with his lifelong friend, Maxime du Camp. The two men went to Greece and Egypt in the 1840s, a trip that inspired Flaubert's early body of work. In 1850, Flaubert returned to France, moved back to his family's estate, and began writing *Madame Bovary*, the book for which he is most famous, and which would take him six years to complete. Due to the novel's alleged impropriety, and particularly because of its depiction of adultery, the French government sued Flaubert's publisher. However, the government's case was ultimately unsuccessful, and Flaubert went on to write several more novels and satirical works as well as a play called *Le Candidat*. Though Flaubert had a romantic relationship with a French poet named Louise Colet for seven years, he never married or had children. The publication of *Madame Bovary* as a full novel (rather than the serialized form in which it was originally printed) brought Flaubert considerable success. After a period of poor health, he died at age 58 from complications of a stroke.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The July Revolution is the historical event most clearly related to "A Simple Heart," and it is even directly mentioned in the narrative (The narrator remarks that "one night, the driver of the mail-coach arrived in Pont-l'Eveque with news of the July Revolution"). The July Revolution, which is also referred to as "The Second French Revolution" and "Three Glorious Days," was a political event that occurred in the year 1830 in France. When French King Charles X attempted to challenge civil liberties established in the Charter of 1814, the nation erupted in protest. These protests culminated in "Three Glorious Days" of violent demonstrations between July 27th and 29th. Ultimately, the French bourgeoisie (upper middle-class) achieved a significant victory as a result of these three days of demonstrations: the removal of King Charles X from the throne, and the establishment of King Louis-Phillipe in his stead. King Louis-Phillipe's reign, known as "the July Monarchy," established voting rights for greater numbers of French citizens, but it was marked by frequent political unrest. Though Félicité and her community are not directly impacted by the events of the July Revolution, Flaubert takes care to demonstrate the presence and influence of the victors of the conflict—the French bourgeoisie—throughout the novella, and chronicles Théodore's attempts to avoid serving in the military (an obligation often taken more seriously during periods of violent social conflict). Flaubert also describes the arrival of the Baron de Larsonniere, a new local government official, in the town of Pont-l'Eveque, an event that was likely precipitated by the shuffling of political positions that occurred as a result of the July Revolution.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Simple Heart" is often associated with the other two novellas in the 1877 collection in which it was originally published, *Three Tales*: "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator" and "Herodias." In terms of Flaubert's careful prose style and methods of social critique, it is also related to its predecessor *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert's 1857 masterwork of realist fiction. In terms of literary tradition, Flaubert's work is often linked to that of his contemporaries, Émile Zola and Honoré de Balzac. Both of these writers penned multi-volume series that explored society through more critical lenses than their literary predecessors. Zola's series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, and particularly its 1885 novel about French coalminers, *Germinal*, is particularly related to Flaubert's concerns about socioeconomic hierarchies in "A Simple Heart." Similarly, Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* ("The Human Comedy") and its most famous installment—*Le Père Goriot*—exhibits the same interest in deconstructing social mores as Flaubert's fiction does. Today, Flaubert's influence can be seen in a range of later writers, including the 20th century European writer Franz Kafka and the contemporary Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, both of whom demonstrate a clear commitment to a Flaubertian realism and social critique.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Simple Heart"
- **When Written:** 1877
- **Where Written:** Rouen, France
- **When Published:** 1877
- **Literary Period:** Late Romanticism; Early Realism
- **Genre:** Literary realism
- **Setting:** France (primarily in the town of Pont-l'Eveque)

- **Climax:** After a long, difficult life, Félicité dies in a moment of religious ecstasy.
- **Antagonist:** N/A
- **Point of View:** Third-person (limited)

EXTRA CREDIT

Claim to Fame. Though Flaubert was certainly not the world's first novelist, he is generally credited as the creator of the "modern" novel. This distinction is commonly attributed to the fact that Flaubert wrote about the lives of his protagonists with an eye toward realism and precise attention to language, avoiding the melodrama and verbosity of popular writers like Charles Dickens.

Not Quite Quiet. According to James Wood's *New York Times* article "The Man Behind Bovary," "Flaubert loved to read aloud." In fact, he once read the entirety of his novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* aloud to his friends for 32 hours.

PLOT SUMMARY

Félicité Barette is a poor housemaid in 19th century France who lives in the town of Pont-l'Evêque works very hard loyally serving her mistress. Madame Aubain is Félicité's employer, whose husband has passed away and left her with a great deal of debt. Madame Aubain sells off her assets and relocates to a cheaper home with her two children, Paul and Virginie, in order to pay off these debts. Félicité is fastidious, diligent, and seems to others to have aged before her time.

The next portion of the narrative moves back in time and describes Félicité's youth. Félicité's parents died when she was a child, and she was separated from her sisters after their deaths. She is taken in by a farmer, who neglects her, beats her, and accuses her of stealing money from him. After that event, she goes to live with a different farmer, where she is well-liked. When Félicité is eighteen, she meets a man named Théodore at a village dance. Though she is initially shy and hesitant, Théodore determinedly pursues her, and she eventually falls in love with him. Shortly after proposing to Félicité, Théodore reveals that his parents paid another man to serve in the military in his place, and that he fears the scheme will be discovered. When Félicité next goes to meet him, she discovers that he has married a wealthy widow in order to yet again escape conscription, abandoning her in the process. Devastated, Félicité leaves her current employment and travels to Pont-l'Eveque, where she meets Madame Aubain and is hired as a cook.

Félicité quickly settles into the routines of her new life at the Aubains' home, and she finds that Madame Aubain's children give her a great deal of joy. One evening, while picnicking their family farm in Geffosses, Madame Aubain and her children are confronted by an angry bull. Félicité saves the family by throwing dirt clods in the bull's face. Though her actions during the incident become the talk of the town, Félicité thinks little of her own bravery. Virginie Aubain is so frightened by the incident that her health takes a turn for the worse, and the family's doctor, Monsieur Poupart, recommends that the Aubains travel to Trouville, a town on the coast of France, so that Virginie can benefit from bathing in the sea.

On the way to Trouville, Félicité and the Aubains stop at the home of the Liébards, a family who lives on the Aubains' property in Toucques and has worked for the Aubains for generations. After they arrive in Trouville, the Aubains enjoy a restful holiday by the sea. One afternoon, a fisherman's wife approaches Félicité on the beach, and that woman turns out to be one of the sisters she was separated from as a child. Félicité's sister, Nastasie Leroux (Barette), now has a husband and three children. Félicité is excited by the reunion (even beginning to buy things for the family, who is quite poor), Madame Aubain does not trust them, believing that the Leroux family is trying to take advantage of Félicité's generosity. Soon, the family returns to Pont-l'Eveque, and Paul leaves home to receive an education.

Félicité is saddened by Paul's departure, but her mind soon becomes occupied by Virginie's catechism, which she attends daily but does not directly participate in. She is profoundly moved by the Bible scripture and religious imagery she is exposed to while accompanying Virginie. Though she never received a formal religious education herself, she learns Catholic traditions and begins practicing the Catholic faith through Virginie's catechism, and she even experiences a moment of spiritual rapture during Virginie's First Communion. Shortly after this event, Madame Aubain decides to send Virginie to an Ursuline convent school so that she can receive a better education. When Virginie leaves home, Félicité begins feeling lonely, and receives permission from Madame Aubain to receive visits from her nephew Victor. They enjoy each other's company and develop a close relationship. After some time, Victor signs up for a two-year job at sea, and Félicité runs for ten miles to see him off. However, she narrowly misses the opportunity to say goodbye to him as his ship leaves the port.

Madame Aubain becomes increasingly anxious about Virginie's declining health, and when Félicité expresses her fear about the lack of news from Victor, Madame Aubain remarks that her daughter is more valuable than a "scrounger" like Félicité's nephew. Félicité soon learns that her nephew has died, which devastates her. Virginie Aubain passes away shortly after Victor, and Félicité misses the opportunity to say goodbye to her as she is dying. Virginie's death also brings both Madame Aubain and Félicité great sadness.

Several years pass with little event until the Baron de Larsonniere, a former consul in America, arrives with his family in Pont-l'Eveque. The Baron's family quickly strikes up a

friendship with Madame Aubain. Around this time, Paul Aubain develops a drinking habit and fails to establish a career, and Madame Aubain pays off the debts he incurs through his expensive lifestyle. Madame Aubain and Félicité continue to grieve for Virginie, and share a caring embrace after airing out Virginie's possessions in her old bedroom. After that, Félicité feels even closer to Madam Aubain and serves her even more loyally than before. Félicité continues to care for the downtrodden members of her community as she grows older. She cares for a variety of downtrodden people: cholera victims, Polish refugees, and an impoverished man named Colmiche.

When the Baron de Larsonniere is promoted and his family is about to leave Pont-l'Eveque, the Baroness gives her pet parrot to Madame Aubain. However, finding the parrot to be an annoyance, Madame Aubain gives the parrot to Félicité. Though visitors to the Aubain house also seem to find the parrot unimpressive and disruptive, Félicité develops a deep affection for her pet, who is named Loulou. One day, after taking Loulou outside for some fresh air, Félicité loses track of him and spends the day running throughout the entire town looking for him, only to find him back in the Aubains' garden. Running for so long in the cold causes Félicité to develop tonsillitis, and she ultimately becomes deaf as a result of complications of the illness. Eventually, Loulou dies, which distresses Félicité so much that Madam Aubain suggests that she get the parrot stuffed by a taxidermist. She does, and is so concerned that the parrot will not be delivered safely on the ship intended to carry the package that she travels for miles on foot in order to safely hand-deliver the bird's corpse to the ship's captain. Six months later, Félicité receives Loulou in the mail and mounts him to the wall of her bedroom, alongside her other beloved possessions.

Meanwhile, Paul Aubain secures a job at the Registry Office and marries the daughter of a colleague. During this period of time, Madame Aubain learns that her longtime friend and property manager, Monsieur Bourais, has committed suicide. She also learns that he had an affair that resulted in an illegitimate child, and spent years committing acts of fraud and embezzlement. This news distresses Madame Aubain so much that she ultimately develops pneumonia and dies. Félicité grieves deeply for her mistress, and lives alone for her remaining years in Madame Aubain's house as it falls into disrepair. Toward the end of her life, Félicité's habit of glancing at Loulou as she prays evolves into a habit of praying in an "idolatrous" way directly to the stuffed parrot itself.

Madame Simon, the former owner of the town grocery, cares for Félicité as she reaches the end of her life. On Corpus Christi, Félicité's favorite day of the year, she has Madame Simon place Loulou on the altar located at the Aubains' home, an addition that she asked the local priest has approved. As the priest and the rest of the Corpus Christi procession arrive at the house to bless the altar, Félicité peacefully listens to them singing as she passes away. In her final moments of life, "she imagine[s] she [sees] a huge parrot hovering above her head as the heavens [part] to receive her."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Félicité Barette – The protagonist of "A Simple Heart," a poor housemaid living in 19th century France. Félicité is a highly moral, hard-working, and virtuous woman. Félicité is born to working-class parents who die when she is a child; at that time, she is separated from her siblings, and begins to work as a farmhand and domestic servant. After working for two farmers and being abandoned by her first love, Théodore, Félicité gains employment with Madame Aubain, for whom she will work for the remainder of her life. While working for the Aubains, Félicité endures significant hardship and loss. Her beloved nephew, Victor, and her mistress's daughter, Virginie Aubain, both pass away, as does Madame Aubain herself. And yet, Félicité endures every loss and hardship by maintaining her commitment to faith and goodness. Though Félicité remains morally virtuous throughout the novel, her deep spirituality is catalyzed by her indirect participation in Virginie Aubain's catechism, and this spirituality inspires her to maintain an intimate relationship with God. In the final portion of the story, Félicité develops strong emotional ties to her pet parrot **Loulou**. After seeing a painting of the Holy Spirit depicted as a colorful bird, Félicité begins associating the parrot with the Holy Spirit. She maintains a belief in this association even after the parrot's death, when she pays for him to be stuffed by a taxidermist and begins praying to his stuffed corpse. When Virginie herself approaches death on Corpus Christi, her favorite day of the year, she imagines a large parrot opening the gates of heaven for her as she passes away.

Madame Aubain – A well-off, middle-aged woman who is Félicité's employer for the majority of the story. She is "by nature, very reserved" and possesses "a certain haughtiness about her." At the beginning of the story, her husband has died and left her a large amount of debt. After selling off many of her assets, she moves with her two children—Paul and Virginie—to a smaller home, and she hires Félicité as a housemaid. Madame Aubain is not as cruel as Félicité's former employers, but she demonstrates a clear commitment to social hierarchy and the values of the bourgeoisie. In a particularly inhumane moment, she remarks that Félicité's nephew's life is less valuable than Virginie's because he is a poor "scrounger" who works at sea. After Madame Aubain learns that her friend and property manager Monsieur Bourais has committed suicide after embezzling money and fathering an illegitimate child, Madame Aubain goes through a period of depression and subsequently dies from pneumonia. Though Madame Aubain does not significantly evolve as a character throughout the course of the

narrative, she does exhibit a degree of affection for Félicité, particularly while the two are grieving Virginie's death, and she even leaves Félicité a small income in her will.

Paul Aubain – Madame Aubain's eldest child and only son. Félicité treats Paul with great care and affection during his childhood, but as he ages the two grow apart. As a young adult, Paul does not pursue a career as expected, but instead begins to develop a drinking problem and incur significant debts. However, his habits do not negatively impact his life for long. After marrying a wealthy young woman with a well-connected father, Paul is able to secure a position in the Registry Office with apparently little effort. Paul and his new wife appear self-interested and opportunistic, particularly when they immediate strip Madame Aubain's house of its furniture and décor after her death. Their actions upset Félicité considerably, as she has come to cherish many of the familiar comforts of her employer's home.

Virginie Aubain – Madame Aubain's youngest child and only daughter. Like her brother Paul, she quickly becomes a source of joy in Félicité's life, but does not maintain the same degree of closeness with Félicité as she ages. Virginie suffers from an unnamed illness throughout her youth, and though she initially improves after visiting the seaside with her family, she ultimately succumbs to the illness in the Ursuline convent where Madame Aubain sent her to become educated. Virginie's death is one of many losses in Félicité's difficult and often tragic life.

Nastasie Leroux (Barette) – Félicité's sister, who she reunites with by happenstance while traveling with the Aubain family to the seaside. Though Félicité is initially overjoyed to reunite with her long-lost family member, paying little heed to Madame Aubain's suspicions that Nastasie and her family intend to take advantage of her, she soon discovers that Nastasie does not share her moral priorities in life. She and her husband treat their son Victor cruelly, and they encourage him to take advantage of Félicité's kindness. After Victor's death, Nastasie and her sister never speak again.

Victor Leroux – Félicité's nephew, the son of Felicite's sister Nastasie. When Virginie Aubain dies, Félicité develops a close relationship with her nephew. He brings her gifts from his travels, and she provides him with food and money to take home to his family. Félicité is greatly distressed when Victor announces that he has taken a job for two years at sea, and she runs ten miles to see him off only to miss his ship as it pulls away from the harbor. After failing to hear from her nephew for many months, Félicité learns that he has died (she later learns that he passed away due to poor medical treatment after he contracted yellow fever). Though she loses many loved ones throughout the story, Victor's death is one of the most painful events of Félicité's life.

Théodore – A wealthy gentleman who pursues young Félicité after a village dance. Though Félicité is initially cautious about the relationship, she eventually falls in love with him, and he soon proposes to her. Though the narration describes Théodore as self-serving and cowardly, Félicité does not recognize any flaws in his character until he reveals that his parents paid off another man to enter the military in his place. Fearful that his scheme will be discovered, he avoids conscription again by marrying a wealthy widow, abandoning Félicité in the process. Félicité is so distraught by his sudden departure that she leaves town in search of a new life.

Monsieur Bourais – A retired solicitor and friend of Madame Aubain's, who manages Madame Aubain's properties for her. Toward the end of the narrative, Madame Aubain and Félicité learn that he has committed suicide after engaging in fraud and an illicit affair. Madame Aubain is very distressed by the event, and she dies from pneumonia without ever fully recovering from the news.

Colmiche – An impoverished old man who lives in a "hovel" in Pont-l'Eveque and suffers from a large tumor on his arm. He is said to "have committed terrible atrocities in '93" (during the French Revolution). Félicité brings him food, cleans his living area, and cares for him as he approaches death. When he dies, she "[has] a mass said for the repose of his soul."

Monsieur Fellacher – The taxidermist who stuffs the parrot **Loulou's** corpse for Félicité. He takes six months--far longer than Félicité expects—to complete the order, causing her great anxiety and making her think that the parrot has been stolen. But Fellacher finally sends the final product back to Félicité, and she is greatly pleased by the artistic choices he made as part of the task of preserving Loulou's body.

Fabu – The local "butcher's boy." Though the narrator states that Fabu has affection for Felicite's parrot **Loulou**, Félicité witnesses a moment in which he strikes the noisy bird's ear out of annoyance, causing her to suspect that he is responsible for the parrot's death. As Félicité is dying, she apologizes to Fabu for the accusation.

Monsieur Liébard – The "farmer from Toucques," another town that houses one of Madame Aubain's properties. Like Robelin, he tries to sell Madame Aubain his wares on Mondays. Liébard is also one of Madame Aubain's employees, and lives with his family in the country on one of her properties. His family has worked for Madame Aubain's family for generations.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Madame Simon – A resident of Pont-l'Eveque who used to run the grocery in town before it closed. Madame Simon cares for Félicité during the latter portion of her life, particularly when Félicité is suffering from the bout of pneumonia that results in her death.

Monsieur le Curé – the local priest in Pont- l'Eveque. Félicité is so grateful that the priest allows her to place **Loulou** on the Aubain house's Corpus Christi altar that she gives the stuffed

parrot to him in her will.

Monsieur Robelin – The "farmer from Geffosses," one of towns in which Madame Aubain owns property. Robelin often tries to sell Madame Aubain "chickens and cheeses" on Mondays.

Madame Liébard – Monsieur Liébard's wife. Madame Liébard serves the Aubain family (along with Félicité) lunch when they stop at her house on the way to Trouville, a seaside town where they have been recommended to vacation in order to improve Virginie's ill health.

Marquis de Grémanville – Madame Aubain's uncle, a man who "had squandered his money on loose living," and who drinks too much and begins "telling bawdy jokes" whenever he visits his niece.

Guyot – Paul and Virginie Aubain's tutor during their childhood, who is described as "a rather pitiful character who worked at the Town Hall."

Madame David – The owner of the Golden Lamb, a hotel located in the seaside town of Trouville where the Aubains take a vacation.

Monsieur Aubain – Madame Aubain's husband. Though he has passed away by the time the narrative begins, the narrator notes that "his memory hovered over everything."

Madame Lechaptois – A friend of Madame Aubain.

Monsieur and Madame Lormeau – Friends of Madame Aubain.

The Rochefeuille Sisters – Friends of Madame Aubain.

Monsieur de Houppeville – A friend of Madame Aubain.

Monsieur Poupart – The Aubains' family doctor. Monsieur Poupart's recommendations ultimately fail to cure Virginie Aubain's illness, and she passes away while attending school in an Ursuline convent.

Baron de Larsonniére – A former American consul who moves to Pont-l'Eveque with his family upon his return to France.

Baroness de Larsonniére – The Baron de Larsonniere's wife. The Baroness gives **Loulou the parrot** to Madame Aubain as a gift (at Félicité's prompting) before her family moves away from Pont L'Eveque, because she finds him to be a tiresome pet.

TERMS

Catechism – Though the term "catechism" can refer to any religious teachings often presented in a question/answer format, it often refers to the summary of Catholic doctrine taught to those seeking to be confirmed as full members of the Catholic church. In "A Simple Heart," **Virginie Aubain** receives a traditional Catholic catechism, and because **Félicité** is charged with accompanying her to her lessons, Félicité receives the same lessons (albeit in an indirect manner). When Virginie completes her catechism and receives her First Communion, Félicité experiences a moment of spiritual rapture, and even imagines that she herself is Virginie receiving communion. This moment is particularly important because it indicates that despite the way in which members of the upper-middle class look down upon Félicité's lack of education, she is still able to access a profound connection with the Catholic faith through her connection with Virginie Aubain.

Corpus Christi – Corpus Christi ("Body of Christ" in Latin) is a traditional religious holiday on the Catholic liturgical calendar. It typically occurs in June and celebrates the Eucharist, also known as communion (the sacrament that some Christian denominations—like Catholicism—believe is composed of the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ). In "A Simple Heart," Corpus Christi is **Félicité's** favorite day of the year, providing her with rare joy and energy during the final portion of her life. Corpus Christi is notable in the story not only because it is ultimately the day that Félicité passes away, but also because its religious significance aligns with the Christian underpinnings of the narrative and its themes. Though Félicité is never fully compensated for her work ethic, morality, or kindness during her difficult life, Flaubert suggests that she receives the ultimate reward when she dies on this holy day and is greeted at the gates of heaven by an image of her beloved parrot Loulou.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAITH AND VIRTUE

"A Simple Heart" follows the life of protagonist Félicité, a poor domestic servant in nineteenth-century France, as she endures seemingly unending tragedy and is given every reason to become both bitter about her lot in life and cautious in her relationships with others. However, even in the midst of sickening heartbreak—after her only love abandons her for a wealthy woman, and even when she's abused by cruel employers—Félicité never wavers from her ethical principles or capacity for kindness. Unlike her privileged employers and their circle of affluent friends, who are morally transgressive but enjoy comfortable lives, Félicité prioritizes her religious faith and morals before all else. Even then, however, she does not reap the benefits of these commitments during her mortal life. Flaubert thus makes the argument that people don't necessarily deserve their lots in life. But given the story's religious underpinnings, Flaubert also argues that moral transgressions will ultimately be punished and virtue rewarded—if not in this life, then in the next.

Over the course of the novella, Flaubert clarifies what, exactly, makes Félicité morally upright, ultimately connecting her goodness to her authenticity, humility, and sense of duty. On several occasions, Flaubert asserts that Félicité's goodness is not learned, but inherent. He writes that her "natural kind-heartedness increased" as she aged, making it clear that Félicité's goodness—her "simple heart"—is neither an act nor an obligation, but rather an essential part of her personality and character that she chooses to foster over time. Félicité remains humble throughout the novella. Even when she saves her employers, the Aubain family, from a violent bull, she does not think much of the event. Flaubert writes: "People in Pont-l'Eveque talked about this adventure for years afterwards. But Félicité never boasted about it and hardly seemed to realize that she had done anything heroic." The fact that she "hardly seemed to realize" that her actions were impressive suggests that she does not hold her personal qualities in very high regard.

Félicité's sense of duty is so strong that she endures significant difficulty in order to do what is expected of her: "For just one hundred francs a year, she did all the cooking and the housework. […] What is more she remained faithful to her mistress, who, it must be said, was not the easiest of people to get on with." This litany of chores speaks to Félicité's commitment to her work, but the statement about Madame Aubain, Félicité's mistress, speaks even more powerfully to her capacity to prioritize her loyalties before her own comfort. It is this unwavering sense of duty, in addition to her authenticity and humility, that makes Félicité so morally upright.

The story, steeped in nineteenth-century Christianity, suggests that morality and religion are intimately linked—thus, those who couple moral uprightness with religious devotion will be rewarded for their efforts through eternal life in heaven. In her later life, Félicité cares for an impoverished old man named Colmiche, who is the frequent target of harassment and derision from the townspeople. Colmiche is "rumored to have committed terrible atrocities" during wartime, lives in a pigsty, and has a grotesque tumor. But Félicité commits to improving his life, even though she herself has few material comforts, because her Christian faith guides her to care for the downtrodden. After Colmiche has passed away, she asks for a mass to be held in his honor, solidifying the spiritual underpinning of her decision to care for him. Though the story focuses on Félicité's devotion to causes like Colmiche's, she is never explicitly recognized or rewarded for her efforts during her lifetime. After a lifetime of hardship, Félicité dies in a moment of spiritual ecstasy. Moreover, she dies on Corpus Christi, a religious occasion that means a great deal to her, precisely at the moment when her local congregation arrives at the altar she has organized for the occasion. As she dies, her beloved parrot **Loulou**—whom she has come to believe is an embodiment of the Holy Spirit—appears to open the gates of heaven for her. This striking, though certainly unconventional, image suggests that Félicité, a devout Christian woman, has been rewarded for her decades of virtuous behavior in a very personal, direct way.

Conversely, many privileged characters in the novella lack Félicité's goodness but still live comfortable, middle-class lives. However, just as the novella suggests that Félicité will be rewarded for her efforts, it demonstrates that morally transgressive characters will eventually meet unhappy fates, even if their earthly lives seem to be full of rewards. One such example is Monsieur Bourais, a "retired solicitor" and friend of Félicité's employer, Madame Aubain. Though he enjoys a comfortable middle-class life, his morality does not align with these privileges. He commits fraud and adultery, and ultimately commits suicide. Madame Aubain is so upset and anxious about the "sordid nature" of Bourais's actions—which would be considered doubly shameful in a Catholic society that views suicide as a sin—that she grows ill herself. Though Madame Aubain does not pass away in a manner that people of her time would consider shameful, her fate, like Monsieur Bourais's, is ultimately a tragic one. Although Madame Aubain enjoys the benefits of wealth in her lifetime, she is cold and often selfish, which catches up to her in death. When dies, "she [has] few friends to lament her death." The novella thus implies that the cost of Madame Aubain's self-absorption is a lack of close friendships, which consequently means she will largely go unmourned and unremembered. While Félicité approaches her difficult life with humility and grace (and is ultimately rewarded for it), well-to-do characters like Madame Aubain are ultimately punished for their moral failings, even if only at the end of their lives.

Because Félicité is a housemaid with very few qualities desired by French society, it appears initially confusing that she is described as "the envy of all the good ladies of Pont-l'Eveque." It's also jarring at first that despite the constant presence of tragedy in this novella, Flaubert gives her the French word for happiness as a first name. But given his treatment of her death, and compared with his depiction of the fates of less virtuous characters, it appears that Flaubert's choice is not an ironic nod to Félicité's difficult circumstances, but instead a sincere assessment of the benefits of religious devotion and moral uprightness.

CLASSISM AND CLASS DISPARITY

"A Simple Heart" is set in nineteenth-century France, a period of time in French history in which wealth disparity and class conflict were deeply woven into France's social fabric. Flaubert's protagonist, Félicité, is born into the French working class, where she remains for the entirety of her life. Through the character of Félicité, Flaubert highlights how the disadvantages of poverty are wide-reaching and affect every area of a person's life. He

also points out how unjust it is that the members of the upper classes look down upon those in the lower classes, and suggests that lower-class characters such as Félicité don't deserve such treatment because they are able to live a life of value even without money.

In "A Simple Heart," the wealthy have clear autonomy in their lives, and they are able to exert considerable influence over their material conditions. Félicité, on the other hand, has little choice in the way in which the events of her life unfold because of her deep poverty. When Madame Aubain's husband leaves her "substantial debts," she is soon able to sell almost all of her assets and still maintain two additional properties. Similarly, Félicité's first love, the wealthy Théodore, is able to pay his way out of compulsory military service for the second time by utilizing his position in society to marry a wealthy woman. And though Paul, Madame Aubain's son, begins his adult life drinking away his career opportunities, he eventually establishes himself in a civil service office with relative ease. Additionally, when Paul's sister Virginie becomes sick, the Aubain family is able to holiday by the sea in order to attempt to restore her health. In each of these instances, well-off characters are able to influence their circumstances by way of their financial means. Madame Aubain escapes poverty, Theodore escapes conscription into the military, Paul builds a profitable career after squandering his youth, and Virginie is provided with the space and time to rest.

On the other hand, Félicité is obligated to move from employer to employer whenever her material conditions require her to do so. When her parents die, she must seek work with an abusive farmer, and then seek work again when the farmer falsely accuses her of theft. When she becomes ill herself, she must quietly live in a dilapidated home with the hope that no one will discover that she is living there illegally—unlike Virginie, she does not have the resources to vacation by the sea in order to improve her health. While wealth allows the novella's middle-class characters to be the captains of their own lives, the deeply impoverished Félicité is left floundering.

One of the ways in which classism is most apparent in the novella is in the way in which Flaubert's characters assume that members of the French working class are valueless and simple-minded due to their position in society's socioeconomic hierarchy. For example, after Félicité shares her anxieties about her nephew Victor—whom she has not heard from in months—with her employer Madame Aubain, the wealthy woman dismisses her servant's nephew as a "mere ship's boy" and a "scrounger" who is "not worth bothering about" because of his undesirable profession. It is clear that Madame Aubain cannot see Félicité's anxieties as equal to hers because she does not believe that Victor—who occupies a low rung on the social ladder—is valuable enough to worry about. Madame Aubain showcases her prejudiced attitude again when she first meets Victor's parents. She assumes that because they are poor, they obviously intend to take advantage of Félicité. Madame Aubain even becomes offended by the way they speak "familiarly" to Paul. She believes that their low social status requires them to treat Paul—a wealthy young gentleman—with subservience and respect. Madame Aubain, like many other well-to-do characters in the novella, views members of the French working class as worthless and beneath her just because of their lack of wealth and status.

The narration frequently points out how deeply entrenched class issues have become in the period in which the novella is set, but its praise of Félicité's virtues implies that a formal education and a high class status are not needed to live a life of value. Along the same lines, the novella suggests that material wealth cannot overcome all of life's obstacles, nor can it provide all of life's meaningful gifts. Though well-off characters appear more capable of altering the courses of their lives than Félicité does, Flaubert points out the many ways in which the machinations of the wealthy—despite their various privileges—are often fruitless in the end. For example, though Madame Aubain places Virginie's life at a higher valuer than Félicité's "scrounger" cousin, she dies in a convent despite all her mother's resources. And though Madame Aubain is intent on placing Paul in the best school possible, he wastes years drinking and incurring debt before settling on a career. In this way, though the privileged individuals of Flaubert's novella attempt to use their purchasing power to improve every aspect of their lives, Flaubert suggests that money does not allow them to cheat death or entirely avoid the consequences of their own failures. Flaubert also establishes the fact that some virtues do not have a price. For instance, though Félicité doesn't have an expensive religious education, and "of church dogma she understood not a word," she still has a profound religious experience during Virginie's First Communion. After that moment, she reflects: "Seed-time and harvest, the fruits of the vine, all those familiar things mentioned in the gospels had their place in her life too." In this way, although she was never afforded the opportunity to study catechism herself because of her poverty, she is still able to enjoy rich religious experiences and live a life of value (which the novella firmly positions as a devout Christian life). Thus, Flaubert shows how the classist prejudice that abounds in French society is unwarranted, as lower-class characters like Félicité can still have worth and live rich lives even without money.

The upper classes of French society would likely interpret Félicité's "simple heart" as reflective of her "simple-mindedness," or just another feature of her lack of class and sophistication. But Flaubert's depiction of the pretention of his wealthy characters serves as a significant critique of classism. His celebration of Félicité's religiosity and morality, on the other hand, highlights how those in the lower classes can still live meaningful lives even without status or wealth.

CRUELTY VS COMPASSION

Though many characters in Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" are members of seemingly polite society in nineteenth-century France, the story often demonstrates ways in which they are considerably impolite—and even outright cruel—to one another. Their cruelty stands in marked contrast to Félicité's compassion, which never wavers throughout the narrative. By contrasting cruel and compassionate moments throughout the novella, Flaubert demonstrates that all people—regardless of their station in life—are provided with many opportunities to choose cruelty or compassion throughout their lives, and that their choices either way will have both immediate and enduring consequences.

Acts of cruelty abound in the narrative of "A Simple Heart." Though there are many kinds of interpersonal coldness and abuse that occur in the story, many of these acts are committed when characters choose to ignore the value of others' lives, priorities, and emotions. For instance, Félicité's parrot, **Loulou**, is mistreated by several visitors to Madame Aubain's home. Though Loulou is Félicité's prized possession, several characters regard him as a nuisance, and treat him as such. Paul Aubain blows cigarette smoke up the parrot's nose, for example, and a visitor prods him with the tip of her umbrella. Not only do these characters fail to recognize the value that the parrot has in Félicité's life, but they also fail to respect the parrot as a living being. Furthermore, by disrespecting the parrot, the other characters are, by extension, disrespecting Félicité and sending the message that she is not important.

Similarly, Félicité's room, described as "something between a chapel and a bazaar," is a testament to the ways in which individuals misunderstand the internal lives and priorities of others, thus causing them to act selfishly. Most of Félicité's belongings are "keepsakes that [mean] so much to her," but that Madame Aubain regards as disposable. This contrast repeats when Madame Aubain passes away, and her opportunistic son and daughter-in-law strip the house of several items that Félicité holds dear, proving that they are prioritizing only their own material interests and choosing to ignore Félicité's feelings—and perhaps even the memory of Madam Aubain herself.

Though Félicité's employers and their well-off friends are some of the most unfeeling characters in the novel, cruelty is not only associated with the wealthier classes in the novella. Though Flaubert's narrator depicts the wealthy as particularly self-interested, the novella argues that all people are capable of selfish and unkind acts, thus emphasizing that they are afforded the opportunity to choose either at any given moment. Félicité is overjoyed to rediscover her lost family members, but they do not turn out to possess her commendable "natural goodness." Though her sister and her new family also come from a humble background, the novella implies that they are not good people. Flaubert writes: "Victor had always been treated cruelly by his parents and Félicité preferred not to see them again. They did not get in touch with Félicité either; perhaps they had simply forgotten about her or perhaps poverty had hardened their hearts." This moment demonstrates that it is not only wealth and privilege that can cause people to act selfishly and coldly toward others, but also—as Félicité surmises here—the bitterness produced by difficult circumstances. Though Félicité comes from the same background of poverty and trauma that her sister does, she chooses not to become bitter or to mistreat others as a response to her circumstances in life; instead, she spends her life helping others who have fallen upon difficult times, like the cholera victims and Polish refugees she cares for in Pont-l'Eveque.

By describing the traumatic effects of cruelty and the healing results of compassion, Flaubert implies that a single moment of cruelty or compassion can profoundly affect the course of a human life; thus, this choice between cruelty and compassion is one of the most important and impactful decisions any person can make. After her beloved parrot dies, Félicité embarks upon a climactic journey to get him stuffed by a taxidermist. When she arrives at an oceanside town to mail the parrot's corpse, the horrors of her life come back to her, "and her wretched childhood, the disappointment of her first love affair, the departure of her nephew and the death of Virginie all came flooding back to her like the waves of an incoming tide." In this moment, Flaubert demonstrates the way in which Félicité has not only been negatively impacted by her class status and her bad luck, but by the ways in which others have treated her. In her "wretched childhood," she was abused and undervalued by her employers, and the "disappointment of her first love affair" was the result of Theodore's decision to abandon Félicité and betray the promises he had made to her. Though at this point in the story, many years have passed since these events, Flaubert implies that they are still firmly rooted in Félicité's mind.

In the same way that the cruelty of human beings powerfully influences Flaubert's characters, the fruits of human compassion are evident in the narrative as well. Félicité's important embrace with Madame Aubain—catalyzed by a moment in which they both grieve over Virginie's death—does not have a fleeting impact on her relationship to her employer. Instead, "from then on she doted on her mistress with dog-like fidelity and the reverence that might be accorded to a saint." In this way, it is clear that although Madame Aubain did not commonly engage in acts of kindness, her single act of embracing Félicité was impactful enough to create a notable change in her "from then on," suggesting the power of such a choice during that emotional time in the women's lives. The novella thus argues that acts of compassion—like acts of cruelty—have wide-reaching implications and can stick with people for a long time.

Throughout "A Simple Heart," Flaubert focuses on the ways in

which his characters fail to fully recognize the humanity in one another, and contrasts their egotism and malicious intent with Félicité's unwavering compassion for others. By demonstrating the influential nature of acts of cruelty upon the lives of his characters, and by illustrating the ways in which compassion can have profoundly beneficial results, Flaubert implies that characters would do well to live as Félicité does, and to exercise compassion when presented with such a vital choice.

LOVE, LOSS, AND DEATH

Flaubert's protagonist in "A Simple Heart," a domestic servant named Félicité, experiences the significant loss of a loved one during every period of her life. Her first love, Théodore, abandons her while escaping from military service, her parents both pass away during her childhood, and her mistress's daughter Virginie, her nephew Victor, her parrot **Loulou**, and her mistress Madame Aubain die during her adulthood. Though Flaubert's narrative and the life of his protagonist are filled with the painful and often premature deaths of many characters, thus highlighting the inevitability of death, his illustration of Félicité's journey in life suggests that death is not purely morbid and tragic. Through her Christian faith, her use of companionship during the grieving process, and her methods of reflecting upon those she has lost, Félicité learns to accept the inevitability of death and meet her own in a peaceful manner.

The novella frequently demonstrates the ways in which characters' attempts to control the arrival of death are often futile, thus emphasizing that death is inevitable. Throughout the narrative, Félicité misses several opportunities to say goodbye to departing loved ones. When it becomes clear that Virginie Aubain is dying, Félicité jumps off of the carriage bound for her sick bed because she realizes she that she has forgotten to lock the courtyard gate. This decision ultimately causes her to be unable to witness Virginie during her final hours. Félicité's plans to preside over the loss of her loved ones often go awry, demonstrating the ways in which death can arrive suddenly and without permission.

Though Félicité's employer Madame Aubain is more capable than Félicité of using her financial privileges to attempt to ward off death (particularly by way of paying for health care and restorative vacations for herself and her family members), she, too, is ultimately unable to control its arrival. Flaubert's narrator describes the mental turns Madame Aubain's mind takes as it attempts to rationalize Virginie's death, explaining that she "first [rebels] against God" and then blames herself for not pursuing better medical care for Virginie's illness. Because this is the second time Virginie has fallen ill, even after a vacation to an oceanside resort, and because no decision that Madame Aubain has made improved Virginie's poor health in the long term, Flaubert suggests that her mental gymnastics are ultimately unproductive, and only increase the severity of her despair.

Whenever Félicité loses a loved one in "A Simple Heart," she understandably experiences a period of profound sadness and considerable grief. But after grieving a loss, Félicité also appears grateful for opportunities to consider the loved one's memory and impact upon her life. Ultimately, treasuring the fruits of a past relationship serves as a balm against the bitter sting of loss. For example, Félicité is devastated by her parrot Loulou's death, and uncharacteristically accuses Fabu, "the butcher's boy," of killing him, showing just how saddled with grief and despair she is. But later in the story, when she has the parrot stuffed and mounted in her room, "she would catch sight of him in the early morning light and would recall the days gone by, trivial incidents, right down to the tiniest detail, remembered not in sadness but in perfect tranquility." The stuffed version of Loulou is described as gaudy and somewhat silly-looking, but Félicité happily uses this inanimate object as a way to remember the bird's life and her unique relationship with it.

Similarly, when Virginie Aubain dies, Félicité is heartbroken, and both she and Madame Aubain experience a great deal of pain. However, when the two begin taking walks in the garden to talk about Virginie, their spirits appear lifted, and they are able to confront to contents of Virginie's closet by going through them together. These scenes illustrate that Félicité gleans genuine comfort from confronting a lost loved one's memory rather than avoiding the fact of their passing. Félicité's behavior at the end of her own life demonstrates the way in which her lifetime of loss has taught her a great deal about confronting and preparing for death. As a Christian woman, Félicité places her belief in the idea that the kingdom of heaven is open to those who live virtuous lives. As she passes away, she appears confident that though her body may die, her faithful soul will be awarded entry into heaven.

After spending many years collecting objects to remind herself of those she has lost, like the lock she saves from Virginie Aubain's hair, Félicité finally arranges for an object that represents her and her unique sense of spirituality to be given to someone who she cares for. She gives this object—her stuffed parrot Loulou—to the local priest, who has agreed to allow Félicité to place the parrot on the Corpus Christi altar. Not only does her choice reflect her belief that personal objects can allow us to remember loved ones, but it also highlights the deeply religious nature of her approach to death. Corpus Christi, Félicité's favorite day of the year, is a holy occasion in the Christian church, and it also becomes the day during which Félicité dies in a moment of spiritual ecstasy.

Though the prevalence of death, as well as the pain it causes the living, is a prominent feature of "A Simple Heart," Félicité Barette learns that attempting to control death—and confronting grief alone—will only cause greater pain. Ultimately, these lessons, along with the Christian doctrine that

reminds Félicité that her soul will continue on to heaven, allow her to accept others' deaths and finally her own death in a peaceful manner.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LOULOU THE PARROT

After inheriting Loulou from a friend, Madame Aubain finds the parrot a nuisance and gives him to Félicité to care for. Félicité's devotion to the parrot, both during and after his life, makes him a symbolic embodiment of her religious devotion, as her relationship to Loulou parallels her relationship to God. Even before Félicité knew to articulate her Catholic faith, she embodied the spirit of Christ by being selfless, generous, kind, and humble. Her fastidious care for the parrot echoes her natural Christian personality and her tendency to treat others as Christ would treat them. Furthermore, when Félicité comes across two works of religious art featuring the Holy Spirit represented by a dove, she believes that the dove looks exactly like Loulou, which further cements Loulou's parallel to Christ. Then, when Loulou dies, Félicité has the bird stuffed and she mounts it on the wall of her bedroom, ultimately getting into the habit of praying directly to Loulou's body as one might pray over a representation of Christ on the cross. Flaubert writes that, in Félicité's estimation, "the parrot [became] sanctified by connection with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit in turn acquiring added life and meaning." However, this claim is complicated by the fact that, at the time of her death, she appears to see the parrot as more than simply "connected" with the Holy Spirit, but indeed its actual embodiment. As she passes away, she imagines a large version of the parrot opening the gates of heaven for her. This unusual and striking image makes it clear that Félicité's version of religious worship is a highly personal and intimate one that ultimately results in her eternal salvation.

Loulou's status as a religious relic also calls attention to the way in which Félicité maintains a relationship to her Christian faith in ways considered unsophisticated by the French bourgeoisie. Though "of scripture she understood not a word," and her neighbors find her attachment to the parrot odd, Félicité thinks about and looks at Loulou in order to access a strong sense of spirituality. Because Flaubert combines descriptions of this unconventional religious habit with Félicité's lifetime of selfless and virtuous acts, it seems that he is perhaps using Loulou to poke fun at the empty formality of certain Catholic traditions, particularly when these traditions are practiced by members of the French bourgeoisie who otherwise live immoral lives. In other words, Félicité's method of religious worship may seem odd, but because it is sincere and connected to true morality, it is ultimately more meaningful than more conventional choices that may be less deeply felt.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Three Tales* published in 2005.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ On the first floor, there was Madame's bedroom, a very large room, decorated with pale, flowery wallpaper and containing a picture of 'Monsieur' dressed up in the fanciful attire that was fashionable at the time. This room led directly to a smaller bedroom which housed two children's beds, each with the mattress removed. Next came the parlour, which was always kept locked and was full of furniture draped in dust-sheets. […] The two end panels of this bookcase were covered in line drawings, landscapes in gouache and etchings by Audran, a reminder of better days and of more expensive tastes that were now a thing of the past.

Related Characters: Monsieur Aubain, Madame Aubain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This selection is part of a lengthy description of Madame Aubain's house in Pont L'Eveque. Though Madame Aubain and her family enjoyed an upper-middle class lifestyle for many years, Monsieur Aubain's death left Madame Aubain considerable debts, and she was ultimately forced to downsize. The description of the home calls attention to several common features of the French bourgeoisie. In particular, it highlights the upper middle class' preoccupation with appearing cultured and on-trend (evident in Monsieur Aubain's clothing and the house's artwork), and its tendency to pursue various degrees of excess (evident in the mention of the Aubain's dusty and entirely unused parlour room).

These features of the Aubain home are notable because, as the narrator suggests, they reflect the combination of several elements of the Aubain's present lifestyle with those from an era in which they were a wealthier, more fashionable family. However, despite the Aubains' diminished circumstances, this description of their home demonstrates that they continue to live a reasonably

comfortable lifestyle by the standards of 19th century France. The spaciousness and condition of the home significantly differs from the size and state of other homes in the narrative—such as the ones where the Aubains' tenants live—and this home itself will also undergo some degradation when an ill Félicité is its sole inhabitant at the end of her life.

❝ At twenty-five, people took her to be as old as forty. After her fiftieth birthday, it became impossible to say what age she was at all. She hardly ever spoke, and her upright stance and deliberate movements gave her the appearance of a woman made out of wood, driven as if by clockwork.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes Flaubert's protagonist, Félicité Barette, for the first time in the narrative. The language in the description paints a picture of a cold, meticulous woman, one who appears aged (even in her youth) and "wooden" in her movements. Though many of these phrases point to physical features, they coincide with Félicité s principles and personality. She is a person of strong moral fortitude and considerable wisdom, both of which are easily associated with "woodenness"—or an unwavering sense of ethics—as well as the knowledge that comes with age. Félicité's features also reflect the toll that hard labor takes on her body; as a lifelong domestic servant, her body has endured a great deal. Moreover, her tendency to remain quiet, as well as her "deliberate" movements, are also likely due (at least in part) to the fact that she is obligated to act subserviently and diligently in her position as a housemaid.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ She was dressed in mere rags, she shivered with cold and would lie flat on her stomach to drink water from ponds. She was regularly beaten for no reason at all and was eventually turned out of the house for having stolen thirty sous, a theft of which she was quite innocent. She was taken on at another farm, where she looked after the poultry and, because she was well liked by her employers, her friends were jealous of her.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this selection, the narrator introduces readers to the fact that Félicité's hardships began as early as her childhood, when she was abused and neglected by the first family that took her in after the death of her parents. The passage demonstrates that, because Félicité was born to a poor family, she had no choice but to work as a domestic servant. Even when she is kicked out of her first home, she must immediately find a new situation in order to survive. The last sentences of the paragraph, which state that Félicité's friends were jealous of her relationship with her employers, suggests that positive relationships between employers and domestic laborers were not common in Felicite's community. In this way, these early episodes of Félicité's youth emphasize the harsh realities of the French class system, as well as the precarious nature of relationships between members of different social classes.

❝ He then announced something rather disturbing: a year ago his parents had paid for someone else to do his military service but he might still be called up at any time. The prospect of serving in the army terrified him. Félicité took this cowardice as a sign of his affection for her and it made her love him all the more.

Related Characters: Théodore , Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Félicité's first love Théodore confesses to his family's attempts to help him avoid conscription. At the level of plot, the information that serving in the military "terrified" Théodore clarifies his motivations for abandoning Félicité (during another attempt to avoid military service) later on in the novella. This passage importantly emphasizes the way in which Théodore's class status allows him to avoid life's harsh realities. Because his family has the money to pay another man to serve in his place, he is able to protect himself from the dangers of war. Félicité, in stark contrast, does not have the ability to improve the conditions of her

life through financial means.

The passage also demonstrates the way in which Félicité's goodness and love for others sometimes causes her to interpret others' actions in a naïve manner. On occasion, she believes that, like her, others are acting out of love or moral fortitude. For example, she does not recognize Théodore's "cowardly" nature here, but instead assumes his anxieties are related to his romantic feelings for her.

❝ Thinking that it would help the children to derive some enjoyment from their studies, he bought them an illustrated geography book. It depicted scenes from different parts of the world […] Paul carefully explained all these pictures to Félicité. In fact, this was the only time anyone ever taught her how to read a book.

Related Characters: Virginie Aubain , Paul Aubain, Félicité Barette, Monsieur Bourais

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

These lines refer to the moment in which Monsieur Bourais, Madame Aubain's friend and property manager, gives an illustrated geography book to Paul and Virginie Aubain as a gift. As Flaubert notes, this geography book is significant because of Paul's decision to teach Félicité how to read it. Throughout the novella, several middle and upper-middle class characters treat Félicité in a condescending manner because she is poor and has not been formally educated. In this moment, Paul invites Félicité to learn from the book without treating her as if she is incapable of doing so. The gesture clearly means a lot to Félicité, because she keeps the book in her room long after Paul has grown up and left home.

The fact that Félicité's relationship with Paul and Virginie weakens as they age, and that Paul demonstrates selfish and opportunistic traits when he reaches adulthood, implies that children are perhaps naturally inclined to act in a loving or egalitarian manner because they have not yet learned the biases of social class. In other words, though Paul demonstrates kindness to Félicité in this moment, he does not make similar choices in his adult life.

❝ For lunch she served a sirloin of beef, along with tripe, black pudding, a fricassee of chicken, sparkling cider, a fruit tart and plums in brandy, all accompanied by a stream of compliments…not forgetting their dear departed grandparents whom the Liébards had known personally, having been in service to the family for several generations. The farm, like the Liébard's themselves, had an old-world feel to it. The beams in the ceiling were pitted with woodworm, the walls blackened with smoke, the window panes grey with dust.

Related Characters: Virginie Aubain , Paul Aubain, Madame Aubain, Madame Liébard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs when Félicité, Madame Aubain, and Madame Aubain's children stop at the Liébard's home on their way to Trouville, where they plan to vacation by the sea. The Liébards are a poor family who rents one of Madame Aubain's properties; in fact, the narrator informs readers here that the Liébards have been working for the Aubains "for generations." And yet, though the family has little financial means, Madame Liébard serves the travelers a significant quality and quantity of food here, as well as plies each family member with several compliments.

In this way, the scene at the Liébards' illustrates the pervasive influence of the French class system. Though Madame Aubain is not demanding or particularly condescending while visiting the Liébards, Madame Liébard automatically behaves in a subservient manner here, flattering her well-off guests and providing them with a lunch which was likely a considerable expense for her household. It is clear that she understands the kind of behavior that is expected of her as the Aubains' working-class tenant, so she immediately assumes the role of a domestic servant even when she—not Madame Aubain—is the mistress of this particular household.

❝ Félicité became very attached to them. She bought them a blanket, some shirts and a cooking stove. They were obviously out to take advantage of her. Madame Aubain was annoyed that Félicité was not more firm with them. She also took objection to the familiar way in which the nephew spoke to Paul."

Related Characters: Paul Aubain, Madame Aubain, Victor Leroux, Félicité Barette, Nastasie Leroux (Barette)

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

When Félicité and the Aubain family travel to the seaside town of Trouville, Félicité happens upon her sister Nastasie, from whom she was separated as a child. These lines describe the way in which Félicité instantly began to care for Nastasie's family after the chance meeting. The sentence "They were obviously out to take advantage of her, is not included as piece of dialogue or one of Félicité's thoughts, so it appears to come directly from the narrator. Madame Aubain shares the narrator's distrust of the Leroux family, and—even further—combines that distrust with her general aversion to the working-class poor. The fact that she is upset by "the familiar way in which the nephew spoke to Paul" (which was likely a casual or friendly way, given that the two were young men around the same age) reminds readers that she maintains strict ideas about the way in which members of lower social classes should behave toward members of bourgeois society.

Chapter 3 Quotes

She wept at the story of Christ's Passion. Why had they crucified a man who was so kind to children, fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, and who had chosen, out of his own gentle nature, to be born amongst the poor on the rough straw of a stable? Seed-time and harvest, the fruits of the vine, all those familiar things mentioned in the gospels had their place in her life too. They now seemed sanctified by contact with God.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage relates Félicité's experience observing Virginie Aubain's catechism. Félicité does a great deal of analytical work for the reader here, relating the significance of Christ's life and death to the function of goodness in her own life. Though the paragraph does not explicitly state that Félicité's goodness will eventually be rewarded after a lifetime of hardship, her claim that "Seed-time and harvest, the fruits of the vine, all those familiar things…had their place in her life too, implies that she believes she will reap the "fruits" of her hard work and compassion with time.

Throughout the latter part of the novella, Félicité not only benefits from this revelation on an intellectual and spiritual level, but on an emotional level as well. The fact that several elements of her life "seemed sanctified by contact with God" comforts her when she feels alone, experiences loss, and, finally, when she approaches death at the end of the novella.

His parents always told him to make sure he brought something back with him, a bag of sugar, a piece of soap, a little brandy or even money. He brought with him any of his clothes that needed mending and Félicité always did the work willingly, glad of any opportunity of encouraging him to visit her again.

Related Characters: Victor Leroux, Nastasie Leroux (Barette), Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation describes the period of time in which Victor Leroux—Félicité's nephew—visits Félicité on Sunday afternoons at the Aubain household. Though the two develop a closer relationship as a result of these visits, and appear to sincerely enjoy each other's company, the narrator informs readers here that Victor's parents use the visits to continue taking advantage of Félicité. In the same way that Félicité did not recognize Théodore's true character during their relationship, she also appears not to notice the Leroux's opportunism (or perhaps, as the passage suggests, simply disregards it because she wants the visits to continue).

Flaubert's description of this greedy scheme indicates that he is not only interested in exposing the self-centered and immoral behavior of the French bourgeoisie, but also in condemning the selfishness of those from lower classes who focus their energies on manipulating others for personal gain.

Although Félicité had been fed such rough treatment since she was a child, she felt very offended by Madame Aubain. But she soon got over it. After all, it was to be expected that Madame should get upset about her own daughter. For Félicité, the two children were of equal importance; they were bound together by her love for them and it seemed right that they should share the same fate.

Related Characters: Virginie Aubain , Victor Leroux, Madame Aubain, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This description refers to Madame Aubain's comments about Félicité's nephew. When Félicité tells an anxious Madame Aubain—who has not heard from her daughter in days—that she has not received news from her nephew in months, Madame Aubain remarks that the situation is different because Victor is a poor "scrounger." The paragraph not only demonstrates how much Madame Aubain's cruel and classist comments hurt Félicité, but also draws a contrast between the ways in which Félicité and Madame Aubain value others. Félicité believes that Virginie Aubain and Victor Leroux "[are] of equal importance"; therefore, it makes sense to her that they both might be faced with unfortunate circumstances. Madame Aubain, on the other hand, believes that her daughter's background, class status, and family origins signify that her life is worth more than Victor's. As a result, it does not make sense to her that Virginie would be in the same position (that is, unable to send news about her current condition) as Félicité's nephew.

❝ Much later, she came to learn the circumstances of Victor's death from the captain of his ship. He had caught yellow fever and had been bled too much in the hospital. Four separate doctors had given him the same treatment and he had died immediately. The chief doctor's comment was, 'Good, that's one more to add to the list!'

Related Characters: Victor Leroux, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides another clear example of an individual's capacity to commit an act of cruelty to a member of a lower social class. Though Félicité is devastated by the news that her nephew has died while working at sea, she is not initially told the cause of his death. This passage indicates that she is able to learn the information at a later date. Here, readers are reminded of the often brutal and ineffective nature of medical care in the 19th century. For one, Victor died from being "bled too much" by doctors—in other words, he died from the doctors' errors. To compound this, at least one of the doctors caring for him made the uncompassionate comment that his death was "good" and "one more to add to the list," which is profane in any circumstance, but especially one in which the death is the doctors' fault. Like Madame Aubain, who implies that Victor's life is worth less than her daughter's because of his poverty and his profession, the doctor does not seem to care about Victor's unfortunate circumstances. His exclamation at the end of the paragraph, which assesses Victor's death as "good," suggests that he perceives Victor's death as just one of many—and therefore without intrinsic or individual value.

❝ They found a little chestnut-coloured hat made of long-piled plush, but it had been completely destroyed by the moths. Félicité asked if she might have it as a keepsake. The two women looked at each other and their eyes filled with tears. Madame Aubain opened her arms and Félicité threw herself into them. Mistress and servant embraced each other, uniting their grief in a kiss which made them equal.

Related Characters: Virginie Aubain , Madame Aubain, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes an intimate moment between Madame Aubain and Félicité that occurs when they decide to sort Virginie Aubain's possessions long after her death. The first sentences of the paragraph reflect Félicité's attachment to objects throughout the novella. She collects objects that have a sentimental value to her, and particularly those that remind her of loved ones that she has lost. Sometimes these items are in very poor condition, like this plush hat or the stuffed parrot that she keeps until her death. But Félicité does not appear to mind, as she places much more value in the memories and feelings that the objects invoke than in their physical features.

The scene in Virginie's room also demonstrates the way in which the grief the women share inspires them to embrace. This moment of profound human connection is enough to at least temporarily bridge the class divide that generally separates them. The narrator even asserts that the hug and

kiss the women share "made them equal," a powerful statement for a novella so deeply interested in the differences between the upper-middle class and the working-class poor.

One of the Poles even said he would like to marry her, but they had a serious argument when she came back one morning from the angelus to find him ensconced in her kitchen, calmly helping himself to a salad which she had prepared for lunch.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs in the latter portion of the novella, when the narrator provides readers with several examples of Félicité's continued commitment to helping those in need. The "Poles" the narrator mentions here are the Polish refugees who have sought shelter in Pont L'Eveque. Though the novella contains many moments in which Félicité either forgives wrongdoing or does not appear to notice it, this passage demonstrates that she does not always let others off the hook for behavior she deems unethical or self-serving. Though Flaubert does not provide many details about Félicité's relationship with this particular refugee, his interest in marrying her implies that they likely had a positive relationship. However, when the refugee eats food from the Aubain's kitchen, ostensibly without permission or invitation, Félicité becomes angry, and readers receive no more information about the relationship after this paragraph. In this way, the scene reveals that Félicité's moral virtue and "natural kind-heartedness" do not result in a blanket reprieve for all immoral acts. Though she often practices forgiveness, her leniency has clear and definite limits.

Chapter 4 Quotes

He thoroughly irritated Madame Aubain and so she gave him to Félicité to look after. She decided she would teach him to speak and he was very soon able to say, 'Pretty boy!', 'Your servant, sir!' and 'Hail Mary!' She put him near the front door and a number of visitors were surprised that he would not answer to the name 'Polly' [...] Some people said he looked more like a turkey or called him a blockhead. Félicité found their jibes very hurtful. There was a curious stubborn streak in Loulou which never ceased to amaze Félicité; he would refuse to talk the minute anyone looked at him! Even so, there was no doubt that he appreciated company.

Related Characters: Madame Aubain, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Though Félicité adores her parrot Loulou, this selection indicates that most characters do not share her affection for him. Not only do they find him annoying, but they also become upset when he does not behave exactly as they expect him to, and often mistreat him as a result. Moreover, this paragraph provides significant evidence that Loulou has a great deal in common with Félicité: he is underappreciated and abused, deemed "blockheaded," and expected to behave in ways entirely dictated by members of the French bourgeoisie. Like Félicité, he even "[appreciates] company" despite the fact that he is so often abused by others. In this way, Flaubert's depiction of Loulou underscores many important features of Félicité's position in society. Because Félicité treats the parrot with her characteristic warmth and kindness, she provides a symbolic model for the way in which privileged characters should treat the poor and marginalized members of their communities.

As she came to the top of the hill at Ecquemauville, she saw the lights of Honfleur twinkling in the night like clusters of stars and, beyond them, the sea, stretching dimly into the distance. She was suddenly overcome with a fit of giddiness and her wretched childhood, the disappointment of her first love affair, the departure of her nephew and the death of Virginie all came flooding back to her like the waves of an incoming tide, welling up inside her and taking her breath away.

Related Characters: Virginie Aubain , Victor Leroux, Théodore , Félicité Barette

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Anxious that the package containing her parrot's lifeless body will not reach its destination, Félicité travels miles on foot in order to hand-deliver the box to a mail-carrying ship. She undertakes this journey at night, braving the bitter cold as well as her own exhaustion, and is almost hit by a carriage approaching in the dark. The passage above describes a quiet moment during this difficult journey, when Félicité is struck by the full weight of all of the traumas and hardships of her life at once.

Throughout the novella, the narrator tracks the development of Félicité's religious devotion, as well as her growing belief that her lifetime of suffering and loss will be rewarded in heaven. This scene emphasizes the surprising strength of Félicité's faith. Even when faced with the culmination of every painful thing that has happened to her, Félicité determinedly places her trust in her capacity for hard work and love for others. For this reason, she continues her difficult quest to bring her beloved parrot—who represents her relationship with God, faith, and the Holy Spirit—to the port at Honfleur.

❝ Félicité wept for her in a way that servants rarely weep for their masters. That Madame should die before her disturbed her whole way of thinking; it seemed to go against the natural order of things; it was something unacceptable and unreal.

Related Characters: Madame Aubain, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation describes Félicité's reaction to Madame Aubain's death, and highlights the way in which Félicité has both rejected and internalized social expectations of "servants" and "masters" that have been defined by the French class system. Though Madame Aubain is older than Félicité, Félicité considers the fact that Madame Aubain died first "unacceptable and unreal." Though it makes logical sense that Madame Aubain would die before Félicité (she is older, after all), Félicité has been raised to believe that, because she is a poor domestic servant, her life is not as significant as Madame Aubain's; therefore, she thinks that it is ultimately more "natural" for her to pass away before her employer.

On the other hand, Flaubert provides a great deal of evidence for the fact that, although Félicité does submit to some of the traditions established by the class system, more often than not, her belief in the importance of compassion and the basic equality of all human beings allows her to disregard many of its strict principles. In this case, the narrator explains that Félicité grieved for Madame Aubain more intensely than would be expected of a domestic servant, likely because employer/employee relationships at the time were often distant and businesslike. In this way, this passage serves as a reminder that Félicité prioritizes her sincere care for Madame Aubain over the expectations associated with their respective roles in society.

❝ Ten days later, just as soon as they could get there from *Besançon*, the heirs arrived on the scene. Madame Aubain's daughter-in-law went through all the drawers, chose a few pieces of furniture for herself and sold what was left. [...] On the walls, yellow patches marked the places where pictures had once hung. They had taken away the children's beds, along with their mattresses, and the cupboard had been cleared of all Virginie's things. Félicité went from room to room, heartbroken.

Related Characters: Paul Aubain, Madame Aubain, Félicité Barette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the way in which Paul Aubain and his new wife stripped the Aubain home of its furniture and décor after Madame Aubain's death. The phrase "Ten days later, just as soon as they could get there" indicates that the couple was eager to take these objects for their own as soon as possible, and because Félicité often serves a moral compass throughout the novella, her response to the event (moving "from room to room, heartbroken") highlights the selfishness of their opportunism. The cruelty of the scene is compounded by the fact that Félicité associates objects with memories of loved ones who have passed away, and often uses them to aid her grieving process. By removing so

many reminders of Félicité's years with Madame and Virginie Aubain, Paul and his wife deprived her the opportunity to grieve the loss of her loved ones (as well as the home she has maintained for the majority of her adult life). Probably, they didn't consider her feelings at all, since she is poorer and therefore considered unimportant, even though she took care of Paul as a child and has known him and his family for the majority of his life.

❝ In her anguish she would gaze at him and beg the Holy Spirit to come to her aid. She developed the idolatrous habit of kneeling in front of the parrot to say her prayers. Sometimes the sun would catch the parrot's glass eye as it came through the little window, causing an emanation of radiant light that sent her into ecstasies.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

After seeing artwork that depicts the Holy Spirit as a multi-colored dove, Félicité begins to associate the Holy Spirit with her parrot, Loulou. When the parrot dies, she has him stuffed by a taxidermist, mounts him on the wall, and eventually begins glancing over at him as she prays. This practice intensifies until she begins praying directly in front of the parrot. Though Félicité derives joy and comfort from this habit, the narrator labels this practice "idolatrous" in this passage, signifying that it would be considered sacrilegious in the eyes of the Catholic Church. However, at the end of the novella, Félicité's goodness appears to win her entrance into heaven, and heaven's gates are opened for her by a large parrot. This scene suggests that Félicité's unconventional religious practices do not prevent her from reaping the rewards of living a compassionate and virtuous life.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ A cascade of bright colours fell from the top of the altar down to the carpet spread out on the cobblestones beneath it. In amongst the flowers could be seen a number of other treasured ornaments: a silver-gilt sugar-bowl decorated with a ring of violets, a set of pendants cut from *Alençon* gemstones glittering on a little carpet of moss, two Chinese screens with painted landscapes. Loulou lay hidden beneath some roses and all that could be seen of him was the spot of blue on the top of his head, like a disc of lapis lazuli.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This paragraph describes the Corpus Christi altar that was constructed in the courtyard of the Aubain household. The altar is decorated with intricate treasures intended to celebrate the sacred body of blood of Jesus Christ. These objects include flowers, crafts, and jewelry. When Félicité offers to include her only prized possession, her stuffed parrot Loulou, as part of the altar's offerings, several members of her community consider it an inappropriate addition. Ultimately, though, the local priest allows Félicité to include Loulou on the altar.

The fact that Loulou is "hidden" among the other offerings implies that, despite the priest's decision, he is still not considered to have the same spiritual value as the other items on the altar. The scene therefore underscores the way in which the novella's Catholic bourgeoisie maintain definite standards of propriety in terms of both religious practice and social behavior. However, Félicité's entrance into heaven at the end of the narrative indicates that their expectations and biases cannot alter her rightful place in the Christian afterlife.

❝ Her eyes closed and a smile played on her lips. One by one her heartbeats became slower, growing successively weaker and fainter like a fountain running dry, an echo fading away. With her dying breath she imagined she saw a huge parrot hovering above her head as the heavens parted to receive her.

Related Characters: Félicité Barette

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of "A Simple Heart," which illustrate Félicité's final moments on Earth. Though her life was characterized by significant hardship, Félicité is smiling here, which signifies that she accepts her approaching death. The language that describes her heartbeats as "a fountain running dry" and "an echo fading away" indicates that Félicité had a valuable, notable presence on Earth, and that her departure will result in sense of silence and lack. Lastly, the presence of a large parrot—a representation of Loulou and, therefore, the Holy Spirit—reminds readers that Félicité knows that she is bound for heaven due to her lifetime of good works, and is therefore unafraid to travel from the mortal plane to the spiritual one.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Félicité Barette is "the envy of all the good ladies of Pont-l'Evêque." She has this reputation because she works very hard for little pay as housemaid of Aubain household. What's more, she's loyal to her mistress, Madame Aubain, who is "not the easiest of people to get on with."

From the beginning of the novella, readers are inundated with examples of the hardships that Félicité faces throughout her life Because of this, the information that Félicité is envied by other women in her community seems difficult to reconcile with the challenges of her life as a working-class woman living in 19th-century France. However, the fact that the Flaubert emphasizes that the women who envy Félicité are "good" suggests that these women are not necessarily jealous of Félicité's circumstances, but of her characteristic kindness and virtue.

Madame Aubain, Félicité's employer, is forced to confront her husband's "substantial debts" after his death. In order to pay them off, she sells several properties and relocates to a smaller home in Pont-l'Eveque with her two children.

The narrative of "A Simple Heart" is punctuated with death, and Monsieur Aubain's death, which occurs before the story begins, is the first in the novella. Though Madame Aubain is certainly faced with difficulty here, the fact that she is able to sell most of her assets and still relocate to a spacious home in Pont-l'Eveque, where she ends up living a relatively comfortable bourgeois lifestyle with her children, indicates that she possesses significant financial resources. The Aubains' privileges, as well as their ability to effect changes in the conditions of their lives, thus far outweigh Félicité's. Félicité must work to survive, and has little autonomy or agency over the course of her life.

Madame Aubain's home in Pont-L'Eveque contains "reminders of better days and of more expensive tastes"—that is, before the Aubains were obligated to downsize—as well as upper middle-class comforts, such as superfluous space (the parlour, for example, is never used; it remains locked with its furniture covered in dust sheets). Félicité's room is on the second floor of the house, overlooking the surrounding fields. After rising at dawn, Félicité works tirelessly until evening. She never wastes food, appears much older than she is, hardly ever speaks, and moves woodenly, as if she is "driven by clockwork."

Flaubert's attention to detail in this portion of the narrative reflects the French bourgeoisie's interest in purchasing and displaying objects that reflect their class status. Here, readers see the evidence of a period of time in which the Aubains were wealthier as well indications that they are not as well-off during the action of the story. Nevertheless, the fact that Madame Aubain keeps the "reminders of better days and more expensive tastes," rather than selling them off along with her other assets, implies that she is still invested in keeping up appearances, and ensuring that her home maintains at least a few indications that she is a cultured French woman with style and taste. Furthermore, the good condition of the Aubain home is clearly a result of Félicité's hard labor, a quality that is celebrated here along with her other virtues. It is likely because of this labor, and the requirements of her position as a housemaid, that Félicité appears "wooden," as well as older than she is.

CHAPTER 2

The narrative shifts back in time to Félicité's childhood. Félicité was born to working-class parents who died when she was a child, and she was subsequently separated from her siblings. Though she is taken in by a farmer who arranges for her to watch over his cattle, he does not care for her in return. Instead, he neglects to provide for her basic needs, beats her, and falsely accuses her of stealing thirty sous from him.

These episodes of Félicité's childhood demonstrate not only that her life was characterized by tragedy from the start, but also that all of Flaubert's characters—not simply the wealthy ones—are capable of profound acts of selfishness and cruelty. Though the farmer that took Félicité in came from a humble background just like she did, he repeatedly abused her and failed to treat her with the kind of compassion that she herself would prioritize as she grew older.

After her first employer turns her out, Félicité goes to work at a different farm. There, she cares for the poultry and is well-liked by her employers. After Félicité turns eighteen, she meets a man named Théodore at a village dance. Théodore determinedly courts her after their initial meeting, and though Félicité hesitates to trust both him and his intentions, she eventually falls in love with him. He proposes marriage to her, intrigued by her cautious nature, but she is unsure whether he's serious.

Though Félicité's good sense initially prevented her from trusting Théodore, his persistence—which likely appeared even more imposing due to the fact that he occupied a higher social position than she did—eventually wears her down. Félicité's caution over the course of the affair signals that her good sense was alerting her to flaws in Théodore's character; however, in this case, she chose to believe that his intentions were sincere.

Not long after the marriage proposal, Théodore reveals that his parents paid someone to serve in the military in his place, and he confesses his fear that the scheme will be soon be discovered. Félicité perceives his fear as a sign of his love for her and grows even more fond of him. But when Félicité next goes to meet Théodore, his friend appears instead, and informs her that Théodore has married a wealthy widow in order to make sure that he won't be conscripted. Devastated and heartbroken by Théodore's decision to abandon her, Félicité leaves her employment at the farm and travels to Pont-l'Eveque, where she happens upon Madame Aubain and is hired as a cook.

Théodore's confession reveals that he has benefited significantly from his class status. Because his parents paid someone to serve in the military in his place, he was able to avoid participating in violent military conflicts and lead a life of leisure in rural France. The fact that Théodore repeats this unethical act not once, but twice, reveals that he has few qualms about his self-serving attempts to avoid conscription, and that he is even willing to break Félicité's heart for his own personal gain. Félicité's decision to leave a mutually beneficial work situation, which was clearly difficult to come by in her community, highlights the profound impact this heartbreak had on her life.

Félicité finds that she is soon able to recover from the pain of Théodore's betrayal by settling into her duties at the Aubain household. She easily develops a strong and abiding affection for Madame Aubain's children, Paul and Virginie, and finds that caring for them brings her a great deal of joy. Félicité receives Madame Aubain's various guests with considerable skill. On Mondays, she greets Monsieur Robelin and Monsieur Liébard, two of Madame Aubain's tenants, but does not fall prey to their attempts to sell their wares. She also graciously escorts Marquis de Grémanville, one of Madame Aubain's uncles who has "squandered his money in loose living," out of the house when he has had too much to drink and begins behaving inappropriately. Félicité particularly enjoys visits from Monsieur Bourais, a retired solicitor who manages Madame Aubain's properties, and whose knowledge and elegance convinces her that he is a "great man."

Félicité's love for children, like her commitment to those in need, is described as part of her natural tendency toward maternal qualities such as warmth and compassion. Though Madame Aubain initially hires her only as a cook, her relationship with Paul and Virginie—as well as her admirable ability to deal with the variety of challenges that Madame Aubains' guests present—gradually expands her role to that of a housemaid and caretaker.


One evening while Félicité and the Aubains are returning home from enjoying a picnic at one of the Aubains' remaining properties, a farm in Geffosses, the group is confronted by a raging bull. Félicité provides the Aubains time to climb through a fence to safety by throwing dirt clods in the bull's face. Though her actions during the incident become the talk of the town, Félicité does not recognize her behavior as brave or noteworthy.

This event, which constitutes the most intense moment of action in the novella, illustrates that Félicité is not simply the protagonist of Flaubert's novella, but its brave and admirable heroine. However, though she essentially saves the lives of each member of the Aubain family, and several members of her community call attention to the remarkable courage it must have taken to confront a raging bull, Flaubert underscores Félicité 's humility by explaining that she thought very little of her role in the event.

Though the bull did not ultimately harm anyone, Virginie Aubain is so frightened by the incident that her health takes a turn for the worse. The family's doctor, Monsieur Poupart, recommends that the Aubains take Virginie to a coastal town named Trouville to receive the medical benefit of bathing in the ocean. 0100

Though Virginie Aubain is faced with illness for a large portion of her youth, the way in which her anxiety seems to worsen her physical ailments is a characteristic phenomenon of the novella. Later in the narrative, for example, her mother's shame and sadness after the death of Monsieur Bourais worsen her pneumonia. Monsieur Poupart's recommendation is reflective of a historical reality, as many doctors in the 19th century touted the medical benefits of bathing in the ocean. But the Aubains' ability to follow such a recommendation, on the other hand, is reflective of the mobility and opportunity that their wealth affords them.

On the way to Trouville, Félicité and the Aubains stop in Toucques at another one of their properties: a farm currently occupied by the Liébard family, who has worked in service of the Aubain family for generations. Madame Liébard showers the Aubains with compliments as she serves them lunch in the Liébard's home, which is unclean, in disrepair, and cluttered with tools and dishes. 0100

Flaubert employs the Aubains' visit to Toucques to draw important comparisons between the Aubains' comfortable property in Pont-l'Evêque and the Liébards' cluttered and somewhat dilapidated farmhouse. The class disparity evident in this comparison is also evident in Madame Liébard's deferential behavior in the lunch scene. She serves the Aubains a great deal of food and flatters each family member, knowing full well that, as Madame Aubain's tenant, she is expected to treat the Aubains with subservient respect, even when they are dining in her own household.

The Aubains enjoy a restful holiday in Trouville, and Virginie's health quickly improves. They all particularly enjoy watching the fishing boats come into the harbor. One afternoon, a fisherman's wife approaches Félicité on the beach. This woman turns out to be Félicité's long-lost sister, Nastasie Leroux (Barette), who now has a husband and three children. Félicité is excited by the reunion and spends lots of time with Nastasie and her family, even buying gifts for them. However, Madame Aubain does not trust them. She believes that the Leroux family is trying to take advantage of Félicité's generosity, and she also "[takes] objection to the familiar way in which the nephew [speaks] to Paul." The weather worsens, and Madame Aubain decides that the family should return to Pont-l'Eveque.1110

Félicité's reunion with her sister is an example of the recurring role of luck and happenstance in the novella; it also complicates the way in which "A Simple Heart" exposes the bourgeoise's biases against the working-class poor. Though Madame Aubain is characteristically upset by Victor Leroux's failure to act in a properly submissive manner around her son, her distrust of the Leroux family eventually proves to hold merit. Though the Lerouxs are not condescending or classist like Madame Aubain, they do take advantage of their relationship with Félicité to obtain material gifts.

CHAPTER 3

Paul leaves home to attend school in Caen, France. He's happy to go, but Félicité thinks the house is "very quiet without him." Soon, she is tasked with accompanying Virginie to her daily catechism at the Pont-l'Eveque Catholic church. Though Félicité does not understand the language of biblical scripture, she is profoundly affected by the religious imagery that she is exposed to while observing Virginie's lessons. In particular, she reflects on the Holy Spirit and wonders what its visible form might be. Félicité develops a relationship with the Catholic faith by witnessing Virginie's catechism, and she begins engaging in all of the same religious observances. During Virginie's First Communion, Félicité experiences a moment of spiritual rapture in which she feels as if she herself is Virginie receiving her First Communion.1101

This is a pivotal scene in terms of Félicité's spiritual development. Though, as the narrative suggests, Félicité was never able to receive a formal religious education, her sincerity, emotional depth, and love for Virginie cause her to experience a moment of profound connection to God and the Catholic faith. Félicité's commitment to her faith will remain strong throughout the novella, and she will continue to access it through means considered unconventional and even inappropriate in the eyes of others.

Madame Aubain sends Virginie to an Ursuline convent school so that she can receive lessons in subjects that her childhood tutor, Guyot, is unable to teach her. With Virginie out of the house, and Paul still away at school, Félicité begins feeling lonely, and receives permission from Madame Aubain to invite her nephew Victor Leroux to regularly visit her.0100

Madame Aubain's ability to send Virginie to a religious boarding school in order to improve her educational opportunities is another example of the considerable degree of agency that her wealth provides her. Félicité's sadness after Virginie's departure is related to the significant pattern of loss in her life, as well as the comfort she derives from human connection. For these reasons, she does not waste time in filling the void of Virginie's departure with her nephew's weekly visits.

Félicité develops a close relationship with Victor as a result of his visits. He brings her gifts from his travels at sea with his father, and she brings him food, alcohol, and even sums of money to take home with him. Félicité is eager to please Victor and feeds him and mends his clothes without complaint in hopes that he'll continue coming back to visit. Victor begins leaving for trips out to sea, bringing back presents for Félicité each time. Meanwhile, both Paul and Virginie come home for their school holidays, but Félicité finds that they've both matured too much for her to continue doting on them as small children.

Félicité's maternal qualities become even more evident as her relationship with Victor grows stronger. She cares for him, enjoys his company, and gives him numerous gifts at her personal expense. With Paul and Virginie grown, she has even more motivation to turn her maternal energies to her nephew, and over time, she appears more like a mother to Victor than his own.

In the middle of the summer, Victor signs up for a two-year job at sea. Hoping to say goodbye to him as he departs, Félicité runs for ten miles to the port. However, she narrowly misses the opportunity to say goodbye to Victor, and watches the ship as it sails away. Deeply saddened, lonely, and fearful for her nephew's safety, Félicité prays to God. She considers stopping by the convent to visit Virginie, but decides not to annoy Madame Aubain by returning home late.

In another instance of bad luck, Félicité fails to reach the port in time to say goodbye to her nephew, the only real family she has. Her emotional state after his ship pulls away reaches one of its lowest points in the narrative when she prays for God to aid her in her time of suffering. The incident reminds readers that, because Félicité does not have the ability or material resources to protect herself and her loved ones, her only solace is her Christian faith. Though it appears that visiting Virginie would lift her spirits here, her sense of duty reigns over her desire for comfort.

Félicité worries constantly about Victor, imagining all the tragedies that might befall him. Meanwhile, the nuns at the convent report that Virginie's health is somewhat delicate again, and Madame Aubain becomes increasingly anxious about her poor condition. When Félicité expresses her own anxieties about her nephew, and particularly the fact that she has not received news from him in months, Madame Aubain remarks that Virginie is more valuable than a "scrounger" like Victor. Félicité is hurt by this comment, but thinks to herself that the two are equally valuable in her eyes. Anxious about Victor, Félicité visits Monsieur Bourais and asks him to show her where Victor is on a map. When he points to a small dot in Havana, where Victor's ship is reportedly located, Félicité explains that she is confused because she expected to see the house where Victor was living. Monsieur Bourais laughs at Félicité, finding her lack of education a source of great amusement.

This scene exposes the ugly origins of Madame Aubain's and Monsieur Bourais' classist biases. While discussing Virginie and Victor, Madame Aubain does not simply state that she is more worried about her own daughter than someone who is unrelated to her; she asserts that Victor's undesirable, working-class job signifies that his life does not merit as much concern as Virginie's. Though Madame Aubain's words are surprisingly cruel, they are consistent with her general distaste for members of lower social classes. When a clearly desperate Félicité asks Monsieur Bourais for help locating Victor, he treats her with the same lack of respect and humanity, turning the incident into a joke at her expense, as well as an opportunity to remind her that she possesses little value in the eyes of polite society.

A letter arrives at the Aubain household to inform Félicité that her nephew Victor has died. Madame Aubain suggests that Félicité go and visit her sister, but Félicité refuses, saying that the death won't matter to the rest of the family. Though Félicité is devastated by her nephew's passing, she is initially silent and stone-faced, and she only expresses the true extent of her grief when she is alone in her room at night.

Victor's death is a traumatic addition to Félicité's lifetime of loss. Her stoicism after learning the news is the result of genuine shock, but it is also likely due to expectation that domestic servants remain quiet and subservient in the households of their employers during the era in which Félicité lived.

Virginie Aubain, who has still not been cured of her childhood illness, appears to be approaching death. Though she seems at first to be recovering, it slowly becomes clear that she likely has pneumonia and may not live. As she rushes with Madame Aubain to Virginie's bedside at the Ursuline convent, Félicité suddenly remembers that she has left the front gate of the house open. She jumps out of the carriage and runs home to close the gate. She is unable to return to see Virginie at the convent until the next morning, when she has already died. She stays by Virginie's bedside for two nights, mourning her death, and cuts a lock of hair to place in her dress, "resolving that it would never be separated from her." At Virginie's funeral, Félicité imagines that Victor is being buried alongside Virginie, particularly because she was never able to properly bury him. Madame Aubain's "despair knew no bounds" after Virginie's death. She blames God, Virginie's doctor, and herself, and is tormented by dreams and visions of both Virginie and her late husband.

Virginie Aubain's passing emphasizes the inevitability of death in the narrative of "A Simple Heart." Despite the Aubains' various privileges, as well as Madame Aubain's attempts to improve Virginie's health, she passes away —a fact that Madame Aubain struggles to come to terms with as she struggles to find someone to blame. The circumstances of Virginie's death also call attention to Félicité's strong sense of duty. In order to protect the Aubain household, she forfeits her chance to say goodbye to Virginie before she dies. Her decision to keep a lock of Virginie's hair with her is characteristic of her use of objects to remember loved ones throughout the novella, and her imagined burial of Victor is evidence that she did not receive the closure she needed when he passed away.

Years pass. Monsieur Bourais "mysteriously" leaves town, as do most of Madame Aubain's old friends. The Baron de Larsonniere, a former American consul appointed to a local government position, moves to Pont L'Eveque with his family, accompanied by an exotic pet parrot. Paul Aubain fails to begin a career, and spends most of his time drinking and gambling in bars. Madame Aubain quietly pays off Paul's debts and Félicité hears her sighing to herself in the evenings.

Paul Aubain's poor choices in adulthood remind readers that all characters in the novella are capable of committing self-serving and unethical acts; however, because Paul Aubain is a relatively well-off French gentleman, it is much easier for him to recover from these acts than those without an upper-middle class mother to pay off their numerous debts.

Madame Aubain and Félicité continue to mourn the loss of Virginie and discuss her frequently, even many years later. One afternoon, while airing out Virginie's old possessions and deciding which to keep, the two share a caring embrace that "unites them as equals." After this moment, Félicité becomes even more faithful to Madame Aubain and "dote[s] on her mistress with dog-like fidelity and the reverence that might be accorded to a saint."

This is the only real moment of connection between Madame Aubain and Félicité in the novella. Because the two are drawn together by their love for Virginie, and the sadness they share after her death, the scene reflects Flaubert's indication that love has the ability to connect individuals from disparate backgrounds and circumstances. Though the embrace does not appear to have a permanent effect on Madame Aubain, who is depicted as a generally cold and unfeeling woman, Félicité is deeply impacted by the significance of the moment.

The narrative moves forward through the years, describing the ways in which Félicité maintains—and even "increases"—her goodness over time. Alongside her household duties, she cares for cholera victims, Polish refugees, and an impoverished man named Colmiche who is harassed by the town's children and suffers from a large tumor on his arm. When Colmiche dies, Félicité arranges for a mass to be said in his honor.

During this portion of the plot, the scope of Félicité's compassion extends outside of her home and into her larger community. Her decision to care for a man who has been ostracized by French society is consistent with her commitment to kindness and caretaking, but it requires her to spend what little leisure time she is likely given in order to care for him in his unsanitary "hovel," illustrating the depth and magnitude of her selflessness.

When the Baron de Larsonniere is promoted, and his family prepares to leave Pont-L'Eveque, his wife gives her parrot **Loulou** to Madame Aubain as a gift. Félicité has always been interested in the parrot, in part because it comes from America, and the idea of America always reminds her of Victor.

Though the Baroness de Larsonniere presents the parrot to Madame Aubain as a valuable token of their friendship, Félicité knows that the Baroness finds the parrot annoying, suggesting that the gift is not quite as generous as it may appear.

CHAPTER 4

Finding **Loulou** to be an annoyance, Madame Aubain gives him to a grateful Félicité. Visitors to the Aubain house also seem to find the parrot annoying, particularly because he won't answer to the name "Polly" or talk when guests are listening. The local butcher's boy, Fabu, even swats Loulou in a moment of frustration. Félicité, on the other hand, adores Loulou and treats him as if he were her own child. She also notes that Loulou seems to enjoy seeing the visitors to the house, especially Bourais, who always makes him laugh.

The fact that many bourgeois citizens of Pont-l'Eveque mistreat Loulou and maintain narrow expectations of how he should behave strikingly parallels Flaubert's depiction of Félicité, who is also the victim of abuse and stringent societal expectations. Felicite's love for her pet is thus reflective of her usual sense of compassion and her own embodiment of the way in which privileged members of society should treat the less fortunate.

One day, Félicité takes **Loulou** outside for some fresh air and places him in the grass, only to realize later that he is gone. She spends hours running throughout town in the bitter cold in order to look for him, only to find him back in the Aubains' garden when she sits down to tell Madame Aubain about his disappearance. The physical exertion of the day, as well as the exposure to cold, causes Félicité to develop tonsillitis. She ultimately becomes almost entirely deaf as a result of complications of the illness. She begins spending most of her time confined to the house, as she is unable to participate in conversations or receive instructions. The only noises she can hear are those Loulou makes, and the two have long conversations that make little sense but bring Félicité great joy.

Félicité's bad luck (or perhaps, in this case, bad decision-making) strikes again when she loses Loulou outside. Her frantic search for the parrot, like her journey to say goodbye to Victor, is arduous and exhausting, indicating just how much of herself she is willing to give up for her loved ones. This time, however, her physical exertion causes her to develop conditions that render her disabled and ill for the remainder of her life. Because Loulou has developed a spiritual significance to her, it makes sense that, even after her hearing loss, his sounds are those she most fixates on and is most capable of hearing.

Coming downstairs one morning, Félicité discovers **Loulou**'s dead body, and believes that Fabu—the local "butcher's boy"—has killed him. Félicité is so distraught by Loulou's death that Madame Aubain suggests that she get the parrot stuffed by a taxidermist.

Félicité's decision to blame Loulou's death on Fabu is relatively uncharacteristic of her, and appears to be the result of her deep sorrow (at the end of the novella, she apologizes to Fabu for falsely accusing him of killing the parrot).

Félicité takes Madame Aubain's suggestion and hires a taxidermist named Monsieur Fellacher to stuff **Loulou**'s body. Félicité is so concerned that the package containing Loulou will not be delivered safely to the taxidermist that she undertakes a dangerous journey at night in order to hand-deliver the package to the captain of the ship that will be transporting him. While she is walking for miles on foot in the dark, Félicité is almost struck by an approaching carriage and falls to the ground unconscious after the carriage's driver hits her with a whip. When she gets up, her first thought is to ensure that Loulou has not been harmed by the fall. Luckily, he is still intact. When Félicité finally reaches a hill and sees the lights of Honfleur, she is struck by a wave of emotion, and feels all of the traumas, hardships, and losses of her life rushing back to her at once. After the feeling subsides, she successfully delivers the package to the captain of the mail-carrying ship.

Félicité's journey to Honfleur is indicative of her tireless commitment to her loved ones, as well as her attempt to avoid yet another loss. Though Loulou has already died, Félicité develops a great deal of anxiety about the successful preservation of his corpse. This anxiety, coupled with a lack of sufficient regard for own well-being, explains why she responds to this near-death experience by checking on the package containing Loulou's corpse before she recovers from the incident herself. Félicité's emotional response to seeing the lights of Honfleur suggests that, despite her seemingly unwavering strength, she is struggling under the weight of her misfortunes—but her decision to carry on indicates that she has maintained a degree of faith in her capacity to endure them.


After waiting anxiously for six months, convinced that her parrot has been stolen, Félicité receives the stuffed version of **Loulou** in the mail. She mounts the parrot on the wall alongside her other beloved possessions, which include religious items, "gifts" discarded by the Aubains, and mementos of lost loved ones like Virginie Aubain's hat. Now so deaf that she can't converse with anyone, Félicité lives "as if in a sleepwalker's trance" and only becomes animated on the holiday of Corpus Christi, which she loves. Around this time, Félicité sees a painting of the Holy Spirit represented by a dove that she believes resembles Loulou. Though she tries to pray facing a print of this painting, she finds herself glancing at her parrot instead.

When Félicité mounts Loulou on the wall beside her other possessions, many of which are cast-offs which the Aubains considered valueless, she begins making the associations between her parrot and the Holy Spirit that will influence her spirituality for the rest of her life.



Paul Aubain secures a job at the French Registry Office and marries the daughter of a colleague. The colleague promises him a promotion in the department. Meanwhile, Madame Aubain learns that her friend and manager, Monsieur Bourais, has committed suicide, and that he has been concealing acts of fraud and embezzlement, as well as an illicit affair, for several years. The distress of this news causes Madame Aubain to sink into a long depression. She ultimately succumbs to pneumonia and dies. Though Madame Aubain's "haughtiness" and self-centered tendencies mean that she has few friends to mourn her, Félicité deeply grieves her mistress, thinking it unnatural that Madame Aubain should die before Félicité herself.

Paul Aubain's success after his period of youthful debauchery, as well as his ability to capitalize on his business connections, is yet more evidence of the way in which his class status has saved him from many of the negative consequences of his poor decisions. Back in Pont-l'Eveque, Félicité experiences her final loss when Madame Aubain dies from a bout of pneumonia made worse by the tragedy of Monsieur Bourais death (and the shame that his immoral acts caused her). Though Madame Aubain was not a kind or warm person, the depth of Félicité's grief indicates that she cared for her anyway, and that she grieved for her as a human being and not simply an employer.

After Madame Aubain's death, Paul Aubain and his new wife strip the house of its décor and furniture, upsetting Félicité greatly. Over the years, she developed an affection for many of the house's contents, and it saddens her to see these memory-laden items removed so suddenly. She learns that the house is for sale and is especially upset at the idea of leaving her room, "the perfect place for poor **Loulou**." She begins praying directly to the parrot in an "idolatrous" way, appealing to the Holy Spirit for help.

Félicité's belief in the capacity of objects to provide comfort—particularly during the grieving process—is brought into relief when Paul and his new wife remove and sell all of the contents of the Aubain home. She is "heartbroken" by the couple's greedy opportunism because the furniture and décor in the home are imbued with her memories of Virginie and Madame Aubain, as well as the years she spent maintaining the home as a housemaid. Like Félicité's unusual secondhand catechism, her use of Loulou as a religious icon is highly unconventional, but her devotion to her faith—albeit through the stuffed bird—is so sincere that the novella's conclusion suggests that the practice was not as "idolatrous" as it may have seemed.

When Paul and his wife leave, Félicité lives alone in the Aubain household, even as it falls into disrepair. She is afraid to ask for assistance with its upkeep because, while Madame Aubain left her a small income, she is living in the home illegally. Her only real company is a local woman named Madame Simon, who helps her with minor household chores and cares for her as her health declines. No one rents or buys the house as the years pass and Félicité grows weaker. Eventually, she learns that she has pneumonia, and because her late mistress died from the same illness, she finds the diagnosis appropriate.

The fact that Félicité is forced to live in the house even as it falls into disrepair emphasizes her lack of options as ill, impoverished woman unable to work and facing the possibility of homelessness. Because Félicité derives comfort from human connection, and particularly connection to the memory of her loved ones, she accepts the news that she will die in the same way Madame Aubain did.

On Corpus Christi, Félicité's favorite day of the year, Félicité is concerned about not being able to help prepare the altars for the holiday. Before the Corpus Christi procession arrives at the Aubain house, Félicité arranges for Madame Simon to place **Loulou** on the altar located in the Aubains' courtyard. Though the addition to the altar's ornate religious objects and fresh bunches of flowers is highly unconventional, it is permitted by Monsieur le Curé, the local Catholic priest. The priest's gesture touches Félicité's heart so deeply that she gives Loulou to the priest in her will. As Félicité grows weaker, Madame Simon brings Loulou back to her so she can say goodbye. He has decayed somewhat and been eaten by maggots over time, but Félicité is now blind and does not notice. She kisses him goodbye before Madame Simon returns him to the altar.1111

Though Loulou's place among the other treasures on the Corpus Christi altar is awkward and unusual, her commitment to displaying the parrot is indicative of the fact that Félicité valued intimate relationships, a commitment to others, and a sincere connection to God throughout her life more than she valued monetary wealth, empty rituals, and physical appearances. To her, the parrot is a holy object because he represents the Holy Spirit, not because he has a cultural or economic value like the fine art and jewelry that accompany him on the altar.

CHAPTER 5

As the priest and the rest of the Corpus Christi procession arrive at the Aubain house to bless the altar in the courtyard, Félicité wakes at the sound of bells and imagines the procession very clearly, as if she can actually see it. **Loulou** is buried under flowers on the altar, and Félicité keeps thinking of him as she listens to the hubbub outside. She continues listening to the procession singing and smelling the incense from it, smiling as she does so. As she dies, "she [imagines] she [sees] a huge parrot hovering above her head as the heavens [part] to receive her."1111

Félicité's final moments on Earth demonstrate that, although her natural goodness never wavered throughout her life, her personal and spiritual development was not stagnant. Instead, she learned a great deal about how to approach death, even as it repeatedly caused her fear and anxiety throughout her life. Because Félicité approaches death with her own version of the Holy Spirit guiding her way, it is clear that she feels welcomed rather than afraid. She knows that she has lived a life of faith, virtue, and genuine love, and when she sees the Holy Spirit—evidence that she is truly bound for heaven--Félicité finally dies in a joyful and peaceful manner.

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