

Gemma Bovery (2014)

French with English subtitles

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 33 min.

Our content ratings (1-10); Violence 2; Language 0; Sex 8/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live,
but whoever pursues evil will die.*

Proverbs 11:19

The author of the Proverb, one that is so similar to the apostle Paul's famous statement in Romans 6:23, would regard this film as a morality tale warning the viewer to stay on the straight and narrow. Not so the narrator of the film, Martin Joubert (Fabrice Luchini), a Frenchman who returned to Normandy seven years earlier to take over his father's bakery and find a life better than in Paris. He is very intrigued when an English couple moves into the run-down farmhouse across the street, especially when he learns their last name is Bovery, so close to the spelling of his favorite tragic heroine and novel, *Madame Bovary*. As soon as the beautiful wife Gemma Bovery walks into his shop and samples the smell and texture of his breads the middle-aged man is stricken, abandoning what he calls "10 years of sexual tranquility" with his less attractive wife Valerie (Isabelle Candelier).

Relations between Gemma and her art-restorer husband Charlie (Jason Flemyng) have fallen into dull routine, and so while he returns on business to England, Martin fantasizes about Gemma,

linking her to the ill-fated heroine of Flaubert's classic novel. He enjoys meeting her frequently when he out walking his dog. He would welcome a more intimate relationship, but it is the young law student Hervé de Bressigny (Niels Schneider) who attracts Gemma romantically. Watching their affair develop, Martin is filled with a sense of foreboding because the bored heroine of the novel who also entered into an illicit love affair. dies at the end.

Hervé has been sent by his imperious mother in Paris, Madame de Bressigny (Edith Scob), to their country estate to bone up for his law exams, but now he spends more time on his extra-curricular activities in bed with Gemma than his law books. The mother becomes a threat when she unexpectedly shows up and is upset because a valuable statuette the two lovers had broken is missing. Broken during one of their trysts, Gemma had taken it home, planning to ask her husband to restore it when he returns.

Matters become more complicated when Patrick (Mel Raido), a Parisian with whom Gemma had been involved with before Charlie, re-enters Gemma's life. Their love affair had ended with his betrayal of her, but wiser and repentant now, he has come to the village in an attempt to reignite their romance. As if this were not enough, Gemma has thought more deeply about her life and now realizing how good a spouse Charlie is, wants to renew their relationship.

Throughout all this Gemma has encountered Martin numerous times, one time even having him remove an insect that had crawled or flown between her back and her dress. Also, worried about rats and field mice, she decides to buy some arsenic. Almost panicing (because that is how Madame Bovary killed herself), Martin warns her not to, his excuse being that it's bad for the environment.

The tragic climax makes this comedy very dark tale that will remain with you, whether or not you ever read (or have read)

Flaubert's novel. Gemma's fate itself is not a surprise, because the movie begins and ends with Martin visiting Charlie and finding him burning papers related to his wife. The surprise is not that of the beautiful wife's fate, but the bizarre circumstances that led to her death. Martin slips Gemma's spiral bound journal into his coat, and the story of what happened is told in flashback through his and Gemma's words. Amusingly, there is the suggestion that Martin will continue his projection of a literary work onto the neighbors across the street. The new ones moving in are Russian, and as the film ends we hear the singing of a Red Army Chorus. I wonder how much Tolstoy has Martin read?

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the September VP.