



## Ideas of Parenting And Mediocrity In Madame Bovary

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Received 04 Oct., 2017; Accepted 18 Oct., 2017 © The author(s) 2017. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

**ABSTRACT:** According to Nietzsche, all individuals can be classified based on whether they are ascending or descending in life. The people in the former category follow instinct and do not recognize good or evil, while the people in the latter category are weak and mediocre. I propose a reading of Madame Bovary through the parents in the novel, and how they promote a mediocrity that traps and situates the major characters. This is useful to understand the changing social realities in Madame Bovary instead of seeing it as a parody to sentimental and romantic literature. Taking Peter Brooks's formulation further, Madame Bovary becomes not just a serious imitation of every day but an encapsulation of Mediocrity. Madame Bovary recognizes this in the course of the novel, and trapped in a mediocre world, she must commit suicide.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, mediocrity, parents, children

### I. INTRODUCTION

“When we speak of values, we speak under the inspiration, under the optics of life: life itself is forcing us to posit values, life itself is valuing by means of us, when we posit values...”  
-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 28.

Nietzsche understands power as an intrinsic quality of the individual. He distinguished between ascending life and a life in decline, which defines decadence and weakness. However Nietzsche states that the mediocre majority, even if it is powerful, does not stand for ascending life. But the mediocre are necessary because a high culture can be built only on a strong, consolidated Mediocrity. The spread of democracy and socialism helps the spread of mediocrity and the national state sets itself as an object of worship and reduces everything else to a state of mediocrity. But it is a necessary means to an end inasmuch that it helps in emergence of a higher type of man. Before this can happen there will be the barbarians who break the common masses and pave way for the ‘superman’. He further states that absolute moral values lead to a state of nihilism and mediocrity.

In Madame Bovary, the society's values can be ascribed to what Nietzsche calls the ‘slave morality’ or which sees in terms of ‘good and evil’; repeatedly several characters in the novel primarily, Emma Bovary herself tries to attain what he calls ‘master morality’-of good and bad-to oneself. While Nietzsche does not refute the empowering value of virtues, he pronounces that these are values of the ‘lowest common denominator’ and imposed on all people while preventing creation of new values. Emma's adultery can be viewed in the same way in her attempts to experience ‘bliss, passion and ecstasy’. But Nietzsche warns that not every person can create new values and transcend the old ones, and this is true of Emma where her acts of adultery are mediated by notions of romantic love. But by viewing the novel through the parents in the novel, and the parents as the original begetters of the Mediocrity I try to undercut the notions derived from romantic and sentimental literature which prevail so obviously in the novel, to understand the macrocosmic shifting worlds in *Madame Bovary*.

As Nietzsche argues in his *Will to Power*, societies can tell us a great deal more about the nature of mankind than can individuals. To do that, a premise of Emma's individuality is essential where she tries to break away from the mediocre majority. For this, a slightly subversive not necessarily anti-feminist reading, of Peter Brooks's work on the body with respect to *Madame Bovary* can be briefly discussed. Metonymization of the body, its division into parts can be seen as defining characteristics or special features that mark a person. Not psychoanalytically, thus metonymization is simply an exposition of chief characters of a person which distinguish one from the other. Further, the metonymization can also be a signifier for various emotions such as

love or economic status. Therefore, Charles' love is reflected through Emma's eyes and hair and her clothes and her other 'refinements'. So if individuality deviates away from Mediocrity, I would like to examine how the parents in the novel disseminate the Mediocrity that circulates in the novel among the characters and therefore contend that Flaubert, in painting portraits masterfully, is not only an endeavor in 'serious imitation of everyday' but also an imitation of Mediocrity.

In his essay 'On the serious imitation of everyday', Erich Auerbach argues that Emma attaches Charles's body, manners, clothing to her memory, employing it in a direction of an aversion towards Charles Bovary. Auerbach identifies images of her discontentment to be individual moments and not just the present for its own sake. He also talks about her negative despair directed at herself without any concrete cause. While, he develops this as Flaubert's style of everyday; he also assumes the plainness of the lives in the novel to be a significant contributory factor. But these claims become dubitable in the presence of a quasi-tragic heroine like Emma Bovary. It is also difficult to agree that the novel manages to depict 'failure of marriage as a condition', for instance, because Charles' unawareness of his wife's despair or adultery is what prevents a confrontation anywhere in the novel till after her death. It is easy to cluster this under 'realism' but if we assess his Mediocrity we find that Auerbach's statements about Charles fully suit him: that he was mediocre to such a great degree that his simple integrity of feeling and truth of his feelings were of no use.

But Charles's Mediocrity is the only one which the author fully traces, from his childhood until his death. His Mediocrity is different from others' insofar that complacency sets in only after he rises in self esteem in his own eyes. This can roughly be taken to begin after his marriage to Emma Bovary. Esteem is always associated with some kind of independence for Charles Bovary. It is when he starts avoiding his classes and starts playing dominoes that the narrator tells us that it 'raised him in his own esteem'. And later on, 'Charles finished by rising in his own esteem for possessing such a wife'. Emma Bovary is primarily different from the widow because his mother doesn't choose her for him, and his transition to the adulthood begins with his marriage. Earlier, when he is still married to Heloise, the widow; the narrator tells of Charles's consciousness of a double self: at once student and married. This is starkly different from the day after his marriage where Charles appears to have become 'another man'. Thus Charles's Mediocrity has some agency associated with it as he finds love and happiness with his wife, and blames only himself for his actions and compares his life against the experience of the past [unlike Emma who compares her to heroines from sentimental literature] though the reader is acutely aware of his follies and blatant unawareness. In the very end, Flaubert even grants him artistic originality through a phrase that encapsulates his very life: "it is the fault of fatality."

Also, what Auerbach calls stupidity or *la betise humaine* of Flaubert's characters is actually Mediocrity, and a unitary assessment of all characters to be living under illusions with apathy and resulting in some external misfortune, is incorrect. Flaubert's narrator does not pass any such judgment at all on Justin or Felicite though they become more central players in Part 3. I do not agree with his judgment that the characters in the novel, living illusorily are alone because of absence of a 'genuine communal reality'. That is because Nietzsche's consolidated mediocre majority promotes unity by binding the people with morality. In *Madame Bovary*, the mediocre characters are bound to their homeland through issue of reputation, and this holds moralistic, economic and symbolic meanings in the text. The following lines from the text show the different meanings:

"Rodolphe resumed, "then I should have to invent excused for a fortnight; and with my bad reputation-"(128; pt. 2, ch.8)

"Nothing proved to Emma that he was not clever; and what a satisfaction for her to have urged him to a step by which his reputation and fortune would be increased!" (157; pt.2, ch.11)

"He was well, he looked well; his reputation was firmly established" (51; pt.1, ch.9)

Following Charles' father's death, he receives a letter from his mother where she tells of the event without any 'sentimental hypocrisy' with her only regret being that he died without the consolation of religion. After telling us about how Emma receives the news and conducts herself; the narrator tells us that Charles was surprised by the affection he felt for the man, and that his mother thought of the worst days of the past enviable. The cause of this surprising grief is, according to narrator, 'the instinctive regret of such a long habit'. This is how the narrator chooses to view Mediocrity in the novel; an amalgamation of habit and regret nuanced with complacency and compromise. Because of this, the monotony which Mediocrity produces is never realized to be that, but the heaviness of the habit by the reader and a habit easily disguises as a feature or a characteristic.

Charles Bovary's parents do not have a happy marriage; he married her for money and her for his good looks. The only connection made by Flaubert between the two people whose histories he describes separately, is the severance of relations as the mother's 'pride' revolts and she turns her mind to business matters. But after Charles is born, the issue of his education brings the parents together and places them in relation with the child.

The father wants him to have a hardy virile childhood and consequently places little import in conventional education. But the narrator tells us that he inherits his mother's peaceful nature. Through out the novel, sexuality is positioned against puritanical morality. Madame Bovary, the stoic parent in the novel, as is obvious from her advice to her son about what is wrong with Emma believes that reading novels, bad books, works against religion, lead a person astray. In Nietzsche's philosophy, morality can be equated with Mediocrity which is to be rejected. It is Charles Bovary, Senior and Emma Bovary who challenge Mediocrity using sexuality. Because of the same reason, we can see that the father has a philosophical ideal of education which focuses on a way of childhood as opposed to the conventional ideals Charles' mother chooses for her son.

But Charles grows up to be of 'even temperament', an average boy who is in the middle of his class. Though ideally there should have been elements of nature from his father, which he takes after his mother and without any especial qualities reserves for him, early on in the novel, a place in the world of Mediocrity. It is interesting how this Mediocrity can be overlooked easily as intelligence. First, his parents send him to study medicine, thinking he can make it to the bachelor's degree all by himself. Another instance is when Emma thinks he can correct Hippolyte's clubfoot but it ends up being amputated due to his lack of skill. This shows how Mediocrity masquerading as intelligence can also delude people who are keenly aware of its presence in the community, and after the fiasco with the clubfoot the narrator tells us that Emma did not share in his humiliation as she could perceive his Mediocrity. So while the reader is aware of who is mediocre and who is not, the characters in the novel do not but the characters in the novel who sense Mediocrity- Charles Bovary, senior and Emma Bovary acutely sense it, and respond to it through dabbling in different interests what they call 'passions' or through boredom or by despising the 'common' people. Thus during Charles's marriage we see his father who comes in a frock coat out of disdain for the people who have come for the marriage. Or broadly speaking, how Charles Bovary, Senior flirts with many women and Emma Bovary tries to find love and passion between her two lovers.

Pleasure is also linked as a product of deviation from norm of education. The indifference he slips to from Mediocrity introduces him to dominoes, student songs, sex and other 'stolen pleasures'. If Mediocrity is the middle of a continuum that is the standardized scale of life, indifference and radicalism lie at opposite ends. Obviously, Charles Bovary, Senior and Emma Bovary are at opposite ends of the same scale then. While he engages in casual affairs with women, she tries to find real love in earnest; writing love letters because one must write letters to one's lover. Both of them get along as well, as the narrator tells us that Emma found him amiable and liked him for his vast experiences with places, dinner parties or women. Also, education is thereby typified in the novel as representative of Mediocrity. The few medical ventures of Charles in the novel fully attest to that as suitable for only the most commonplace of cures.

Old Rouault is not very different as a parent. Though he can clearly perceive Charles to be weak, he accepts him because he wouldn't provide any difficulties for the dowry. He manages to provide Emma a convent education, is depicted as a simple minded man. While Flaubert paints a sympathetic picture of the old man, he does not share his daughter's active imagination as shown in his rejection of the idea of the midnight wedding. There is a brief passage about his emotions two days after the wedding when he reminisces about his own married days and he is afraid to turn and look towards the church because he was sure that 'the sight would make him even sadder', and he turns to go home. This granted subjectivity through the narrator is thus rejected by Rouault and he remains with the mediocre. Only with his daughter's death does he turn back and look, a sort of retrospection but the symbolic value of that is lost in his rejection to look at his granddaughter.

What is prized in the world of *Madame Bovary* and the apotheosis of the Mediocrity is Monsieur Homais and his family. That is, though the narrator makes the reader disgusted with his verbosity, opportunism and pettiness, he succeeds in the novel, which ends with his winning the Croix de la Legion d'Honneur. After Emma marvels how ugly her child is, the reader is shown the crude contrast between her and Homais' family, where the parents worry too much about their children and take every sort of precaution to prevent the 'various dangers that threaten childhood'. The last chapter is not just an epilogue to the main characters; it is also a description of the prosperity that marks Homais and his family where everything is 'flourishing and merry'. The children are pictured as intelligent and inventive making him the most fortunate father as opposed to Berthe who is sent to a cotton mill to earn a living.

If in the cosmos of Mediocrity, the good and evil can be diametrically opposed using two pairs: Monsieur Homais[good] and Monsieur Lheureux[evil], and Monsieur Bournisien[good] and Madame Bovary[evil]. That Monsieur Homais enjoys the merits of Mediocrity is explained above. Though greedy and eager for customers, he practices restraint to deserve the comforts of society-mainly, reputation. On the contrary, it is accepted knowledge to the community in Yonville that Lheureux the shopkeeper kills people with his bills by selling them out and causing execution and public disgrace. He is described as a 'wheedler, a sneak' by the landlady and causes Emma's death in the end through his bills. Perhaps it could be said that the extreme economic reality of the bills provides an antidote to Emma's fantasies by hindering them further towards the end of the novel. Abbe Bournisien is introduced by his being offended by little Berthe being baptized by

champagne; later when Emma comes to him he is too busy shouting at the choir boys to pay any attention to her and views sufferings to afflict only the poor. This kind of pragmatic religion is promoted where under suffering one must give oneself up to heaven and God. This is contrasted with Emma's violent religion where she turns to God after she falls ill, and the cure could be thought heresy or extravagance. A nexus between economics and religion can also be established between Homais and Bournisien ironically; as they keep having hypocritical, near-violent discussions over the nature of religion but fall asleep together after Emma's death, which shows the superficial nature of the two concerns. Religion and money can then be understood as two primary institutions of control in the world of *Madame Bovary*.

Emma's rejection of Mediocrity through her embracing the notion of 'good and bad' and not 'good and evil' is evident from an early age when, in the convent she wants to get 'a personal profit out of things'. That, she 'reached at first attempt the rare ideal of delicate lives, never attained by mediocre hearts'. That it is rare and ideal foreshadows uncertainty of achievement, and that it takes place inside a mediocre community out of which movement is not possible, however ascertains failure. This is one of the reasons why Emma Bovary has to die at the end of the novel. Seeking to rise out of Mediocrity then presupposes disillusionment, and this too is visible very early in the novel where the narrator tells us that Emma felt there was 'nothing more to learn, and nothing more to feel'. The rest of the novel can be seen as a futile attempt to rewrite this kismet.

Emma's awareness of this Mediocrity in the novel takes a specific course, and we know this through the only character that sees what Mediocrity produces concomitantly. Causing monotony, Mediocrity results in repulsion which she feels towards her husband and her girl child which cause rejection and urges to escape when she wants to run away with Rodolphe which on failure freezes memory of her lover, and she turns then to religion and charity which she disavows for love with Leon which, she finds an illusion because of the reality that is money and which ruptures her illusions permanently about love and causes her to regret. This regret results in her suicide.

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