Madame Bovary: Critical Analysis of Charles Bovary

As Aristotle once said, “character may also be called the most effective means of persuasion.” Outwardly, Charles Bovary in Gustave Flaubert’s novel Madame Bovary embodies the term mediocrity wholeheartedly, and with an outstanding willingness to accept it. However, with closer analysis of the implications of his actions, the reader can distinguish the veiled emotional intricacy of a man shadowed by his wife’s naive endeavours and the constraints of a provincial life. For readers, his elaborate psyche is most pointedly revealed after his wife’s tragic death where, in the final stages of his grief, Charles’ confrontation with his wife’s known lover, Rodolphe, elicits a cathartic response in readers; solidifying the notion of his complex character despite the recurring themes of monotony surrounding him.

Contrary to Flaubert’s known intentions of eliciting sympathy for the controversial character of Emma Bovary, the reader is directly called to respond to the innermost feelings of a man dismissed from the beginning as average and incapable of profound feeling or action with the ironic culmination of his emotion in the last pages of the novel. Directly influenced by his own experience with adultery, Flaubert’s flawed presentation of Charles’ character may have been a direct result of his own ventures. After being involved in an extramarital affair with a female poet name Louise Colet, Flaubert delves into a novel representing the realistic life of a woman of the bourgeois class which he so detests. As he later reveals, he feels a strong connection with Emma’s character, proclaiming “Madame Bovary c’est moi!” Given the personal motivation of upholding the reputations of such characters as he and Emma Bovary, Flaubert incidentally includes his skewed judgement of Charles’ simple appearance on behalf of rationalizing his beloved characters’ unreasonable actions. Parallel to Emma, Flaubert openly aestheticizes art as an expression of superiority. According to an article entitled “Flaubert: A Portrait,” published in the Washington Post in 1939 by Huntington Cairns, Flaubert was quoted, writing, “what is best in art will always elude mediocre natures, that is to say, seven-eighths of the human race.” It is this attitude which detaches him from the ability to present an entirely realistic novel; the tendency to present certain characters one-dimensionally unjustly.

However, consideration of the author’s motives aside, Charles’ moral disposition is what inspires a sense of pity and admiration for him from readers throughout the novel. Beginning in his youth, Charles is put at a disadvantage; his insufficient early education, family expectations, and the effects of an overbearing mother figure all contribute to his perceived shortcomings. The development of Charles as one of average intelligence and constrained emotional ability begins with his first experience in school. In the face of humiliation induced by both his peers and his teacher for his lack of knowledge of the school’s typical procedures, a narrator described Charles’ reaction as follows; “All was calm again. Heads bent over folders, and for two hours the new boy’s behavior continued to
be exemplary, even though, from time to time, a wad of paper fired from the nib of a pen came and splattered on his face. But he would wipe himself off with his hand and remain motionless, his eyes lowered." (*Madame Bovary*, 5) At an early stage of the novel, and of Charles’ life, his behavior is being characterized by his placidity and tolerance. This first response to antagonism sets a standard of his morality for the remainder of the novel, and is similarly displayed in future instances.

The conflicting intentions of his parents lead largely to his assumed persona in later life; including in his marriages and position in the working community. Charles’ father, Monsieur Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, a failed businessman in all respects, lent only his profoundly cynical opinions to the raising of his only son. Most particularly, his opinion on education and civility alienated him from many social circles. His regressive ideas of manliness coincided with his distinctive lack of appreciation for education; “imagine himself an enlightened thinker, even said that [the child] could go quite naked, like the young of animals.” (*Madame Bovary*, 6) Quite opposite, and far more influential on the young Charles, were his mother’s ideals of refined civilization. With noble expectations of her son, “she dreamed of high positions, she saw him already grown, handsome, witty, established, in bridges and roads or the magistracy,” (*Madame Bovary*, 7) she unintentionally hinders his individual growth and ambition. Struggling beneath the influence of two adverse ideals for his life, Charles’ potential for success is smothered. As typical for his compliant nature, he accepts his mother’s chosen path without much resistance, and dedicated himself to his studies at an educational level far outreaching his preparedness; this relentless dedication despite mediocre scores portrays him to readers as endearing and establishes a certain likeability before he is so starkly contrasted with his second wife, Emma.

At only three instances in the book is Charles’ true depth of character revealed, and the first occurs amidst his maturing as a young individual. Becoming “indifferent” to his mother’s all-encompassing scheme of achieving greatness through her son, Charles begins to neglect his medical studies. In a subdued act of defiance, “he acquired the habit of going to taverns, along with a passion for dominoes. To shut himself up every night in a grimy public room, in order to tap on a marble table with little mutton bones marked with black dots, seemed to him a precious assertion of his freedom, which raised him in his own esteem. It was like an initiation into the world.” (*Madame Bovary*, 9) This character shift, however short-lived, disrupts the static nature of Charles, and lends significantly to creating an emotional response in the reader that will ultimately be absolved with his profound response to conflict in the novel’s cathartic moment. This initial experience with rebellion forever alters the reader’s interpretation of Charles’ emotional and intellectual competency.

Reverting back to passivity, and perhaps sympathy for his mother, Charles openly accepts her misplaced blame in response to his failed exam; “she made excuses for him,
shifting the blame for his failure to the unfairness of the examiners." (Madame Bovary, 10) In parallel to his various displays of complexity, it can be inferred that his repeated displays of weakness in lieu of his mother’s proclamations of continued control over him may be pretenses displayed for the sake of his mother’s happiness. As made apparent throughout the novel, the elder Madame Bovary is bound in an oppressive marriage; “she had suffered so much, without complaining at first, when she saw him running after every slut in the village and when a score of low-life places would send him back to her at night surfeited and stinking drunk!” (Madame Bovary, 6) Growing up encompassed between two nurturing figures with a relationship described as such, it is not a completely unfounded inference to be made by readers that Charles consciously makes every effort to pacify his mother in order to relieve some amount of her daily torment brought on by the man which he was named for. Displaying a desire to succeed for the sake of his mother’s well-being, Charles dedicates himself to his studies once more, resulting in his success. “What a great day for his mother!” (Madame Bovary, 10)

Given his youth and inexperience with decisions not made for him by his overbearing mother, it is not surprising that he complies with one more prominent ruling of hers before quietly rejecting her voice of judgement; he marries the forty-five year old widower, Madame Dubuc. Silently forfeiting control to another dominant female figure, Charles still wishes for freedom and “the ability to do as he liked with himself and his money.” (Madame Bovary, 10) However, having grown comfortable in submissive mannerisms, he assumes his role beneath an authoritative woman very similar to his mother in abrasive semblance and maturation beyond his limited years and experiences whilst living a relatively sheltered life. Not surprisingly, Charles is soon tempted into disobedience by a young woman similar to his mother in perspective, but much more accessible due to her youth and feigned innocence upon their first meeting.

Throughout the novel, a theme of desire versus duty appears with Charles as a character. In many instances, he is greatly restrained by a sense of moral and personal duty, giving him another element of subtle complexity. As directly stated by the narrator, Charles is engaged in a constant internal struggle; “The boldness of his desire protested against the servility of his behavior.” (Madame Bovary, 17) The presence of such a struggle inwardly at a time of outward passivity gives an implication of the emotional depth of Charles as a fully rounded character, rather than a caustic companion as Emma continually illustrates him. The prompt and brief presentation of Charles’ multifaceted nature in terms of the novel contests the idea that Charles is not presented in full until his display of absolute morality at the end of the novel with his confrontation with Rodolphe, and suggests Flaubert’s personal conflict with a character similar to Charles in his own life. While outwardly identifying with the controversiality of Emma’s desires and skewed integrity, Flaubert may have harbored resentment for the righteous man that he created on paper, but could not emulate.
As pointed out by the author on page fifteen, Charles does not give much consideration to his motivations for his feelings toward Emma in the early stages of their acquaintance; however, unlike implications made by Flaubert, this does not characterize him in a negative way. Flaubert’s ideals of making art of one’s emotions correlates with Emma’s naïve belief in the idealized reality of books, which becomes her tragic flaw, leading to her eventual, very poetic, demise. Inversely, Charles consistently takes pleasure in simple things; “he liked to find himself arriving at the farmyard; he liked the barn and the stables; he liked Mademoiselle Emma’s small clogs on the washed flagstones of the kitchen;” (Madame Bovary, 15) As later displayed, Charles’ distaste for the extravagant life which Emma so relished was an integral part of his maintaining an honorable reputation after the downfall of his household.

Mother Teresa once said, “we can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love.” Saving him from his own solitude is his infatuation with the young Emma Rouault. Another shift in Charles’ typically withdrawn nature is depicted on the young couples’ wedding day; “Charles was not a wit by nature, he had not been brilliant during the wedding festivities.. the next day, however, he seemed another man.” (Madame Bovary, 26) This indirect characterization through the observation of a narrator illustrates a man utterly changed by love for his bride. In blatant disregard for his mother’s opinion during the wedding planning, and complete transformation into a doting husband marks for readers the complete evolution of a once sheltered individual into a man capable of experiencing this overwhelming devotion to Emma. Keeping this in mind, with the progression of their marriage and Emma’s surmounting unhappiness, Charles cannot be held responsible for his seemingly unfounded trust in his wife’s fidelity. With Emma’s artful mastery of manipulation displayed in every relationship in which she is engaged, it becomes clear that he is not masked by stupidity, but rather his undying dedication to his wife. This, however interpreted by some as a proclamation of simple-mindedness, supports the notion of Charles as one of the only realistically likeable characters throughout the novel.

In the depiction of Charles as a member of the rural community and submissive husband, a sense of pity is evoked from the reader purely from his continual display of complete morality in response to overly dominant figures in his life. Emma’s spiteful views of her non-aestheticized husband aside, the reader is called to consider Charles’ amiability and respectable reputation among the people which he lives around; “The country people loved him dearly because he was not proud. He patted the children, never went into taverns, and, on top of that, inspired confidence by his morality.” (Madame Bovary, 52) While readers are meant to be easily persuaded toward a diminished opinion of Charles through the views of his wife, (and incidentally the social comments of Flaubert on what he considered to be a class beneath the complexity of art,) the indirect characterization of Charles through the opinion of the townspeople is a testament to him as a truly admirable
While favoring the perspective of Charles as a repressive component to the artistically inclined Emma, Flaubert also subtly introduces the possibility of Charles’ being repressed by his wife’s frivolous nature. Using a deliberately emphasized phrase, the author highlights the inconvenience which Charles was willing to suffer for the sake of his wife ailed with nothing more than self-pity. In describing the final details of their migration to Yonville, Flaubert gives consideration to Charles’ vast sacrifices, “it cost Charles to leave Tostes after four years and at a time when he was beginning to establish himself.” (Madame Bovary, 58) By italicizing this specific phrase, Flaubert directly acknowledges Charles and his struggles endured for the sake of Emma, rather than the other way around, for the first time. Creating a relatable situation in which the reader can empathize with Charles in the midst of a novel devoted to the innermost feelings of a woman overcome with a warped sense of reality introduces him as not only a character used to evoke pity from readers, but also as a more accessible personality for readers as compared to those surrounding him. For the majority of modern readers, Emma’s extreme naivete, Leon’s sophisticated facade, and Rodolphe’s manipulative tendencies may not be as easily grasped as Charles’ sincere unpretentious nature. For this reason, Charles can be interpreted as a more influential character in the narrative than Flaubert may have originally intended.

Before much of the reader’s attention is shifted to Emma and her experiences in her extramarital affairs, Charles’ human complexity is displayed once more in his subtle recognition of the shallowness of the relationship between him and his wife, and his desire to alter this with the addition of a child into their home. Directly referring to Charles’ intentions of improving their marriage with a child, the omniscient narrator describes the happy distraction that the pregnancy presented to Charles; “as her term grew near, she became all the more dear to him. Another bond of the flesh was being established between them, and something like a pervasive sense of a more complex union.” (Madame Bovary, 76) This directly illustrated desire to strengthen his marital relationship only strengthens the readers empathy and recognition of depth in Charles’ character. With this natural impulse to display love for his wife in the form of a child, his pure intentions solidify him as an exact opposite of his wife. In this specific instance, the irreconcilable differences of the couple are highlighted with her lofty expectations of her child, very similarly displayed in the elder Madame Bovary, compared directly with his more nurturing intentions. With Flaubert’s deliberate characterization of Charles’ mother in a negative way, he also indirectly characterizes Emma as being remarkably similar in her selfish tendencies. While the author is clearly more apt to sympathize with Emma, the reader is influenced only by obscure nuances to relate on a moral level with Charles; incidentally, the author’s efforts to portray Charles with as provincial a mindset as possible call the reader to analyze his actions more than his statements.
Recalling the opening quote from Aristotle concerning the perception of character as merely an analysis of the person’s intentional means of persuasion, it can be determined that Charles is the character that can be thoroughly understood by readers. Given the limited commentary on his inner thoughts and how they alter his outward behavior, readers cannot draw concrete conclusions on his true nature without the biased commentary of his wife and the narrator (who can be assumed to be the voice of Flaubert.) Therefore, given only the implied simplicity of his motivations and seemingly moral actions, Charles can be justly perceived and easily understood as a character uninfluenced by selfish means. This, unlike the insinuations of Flaubert, has no bearing on the complexity of his personal psyche, but rather distinguishes him from his corrupt surroundings and presents his actions as a separate entity of his overall persona.

As presented in several distinct instances, Charles as a character is developed as a complex individual through extremely simplistic means; the omitting of specific observations of the omniscient narrator and Charles’ own personal commentary on the events and characters surrounding him. In the climactic moment of his character, Charles represents the cathartic moment of the novel for readers in his confrontation of his wife’s lover, Rodolphe. After his wife’s suicide, and trapped in his own grieving process, Charles discovers a letter written by Rodolphe to Emma ending their relationship with feigned regret; he writes, “Forget me! Why did I ever have to meet you? Why were you so beautiful? Is it my fault? Oh, Lord, no! Fate is to blame, only fate!” (Madame Bovary, 177) Upon his meeting with Rodolphe after his discovery of the former affair, Charles ironically places the blame on fate rather than either party. On a surface level, his statement, “I don’t hold it against you,” (Madame Bovary, 310) is another perfect example of his honorable morality, making him a man at the very least capable of comprehending emotions of insurmountable grief, but also the strength required to forgive a man who essentially wronged him in the most unforgivable way. However, related to the presentation of his character in former instances throughout the novel, this specific moment can be interpreted as a final character shift for Charles, truly bringing his character to full circle. In this moment, Charles reveals his formerly unrecognizable depth with a single moment of reclaiming control of his life; he finally places blame on Emma.

Leading up to his climactic encounter with Rodolphe, Charles’ outward behavior is described by the narrator as being irrational with grief. In response to Emma’s unexpected death, Charles becomes the object of much pity and shallow condolences from his neighbors; “Now and then, some curious person would hoist himself above the garden hedge, and observe with amazement this wild man with his long beard, dressed in dirty clothes, who wept aloud as he walked.” (Madame Bovary, 309) Unable to express his sorrows constructively, Charles gives testament to the extent of his love for Emma through conventional outlets; wishing to keep her body undisturbed in the house, requesting that a lock of her hair be kept for sentimental purposes, etc. As consistent with the illustration of
Charles as a creature incapable of artistic expression of his emotions, it is suggested that his reaction to this tragedy is an example of his shallow emotional capacity. However, recalling his childhood experiences being heavily influenced by his parents’ shattered marriage, it realistically cannot be expected of him to express his emotions in unconventional ways. Throughout his youth, and later his two marriages, he was not permitted to explore his own individuality; therefore capable only of emulating the displays of grief that others had exhibited. In this way only, Charles’ actions can be directly linked in similarity to his wives’; each of them base their reactions on their attempt of poeticism rather than embracing their instinctual responses. As William Reddy suggests in his article “Against Constructionism,” published in the Chicago Journals, the assumed emotional response can be interpreted as an aspect of character; “the absolute plasticity of the individual is a necessary implication of strong constructionist stances on questions of sexuality, ethnicity, and identity.” In other words, the reader can only interpret characters’ intentions through their outward appearance, thus giving the inability to truly discern the sincerity of active emotion.

In this moment of personal epiphany in the presence of Rodolphe, Charles evokes a strong sense of respect from readers for the first time. Rather than display an outburst of feigned or otherwise reinterpreted anger, as would be expected, Charles calls upon his own moral strength to forgive Rodolphe. In doing so, the blame is then seemingly shifted to a higher being as well as, in part, his late wife. His physical reaction to Rodolphe is described by the narrator as follows; “Charles was not listening to him; Rodolphe noticed this, and in the mobility of Charles’ face, he could follow the progress of his memories. It was gradually turning crimson, the nostrils were contracting and widening rapidly, the lips were quivering.” (Madame Bovary, 310) In this precise moment of such mounting internal conflict, it can be assumed that the memories mentioned could only be those of discovering Emma’s love letters, and hence the discovery of her former affairs. Given this information, the reader can connect the fact that this moment of outwardly controlled, inwardly tumultuous, emotion is directed toward Emma, holding her accountable for her earthly actions. Consequently, feelings of pity accumulated through events of the novel in the reader are absolved with Charles’ only intentional act of rebellion against his wife’s commanding influence.

In a dramatic shift in character by Charles in the very end of the novel, his feelings of resentment and insignificance can be lifted from his countenance, and with this, he essentially dies of a broken heart; an ironically poetic death in terms of the juxtaposition of the event in relation to his highlighted simplicity throughout much of the novel. As far as the author’s representation of fictional circumstances, it is not surprising that Charles is represented on a multifaceted level after Emma’s death, due to Flaubert’s obvious inclination to provoke sympathy of readers for Emma, it is not until after her death that he is able to call attention to Charles as more than an imbecile figure. For this reason, readers’
perception of the novel as a whole is altered by their consequent consideration for the fact that the representation of Charles may have been only a result of Flaubert's natural partiality toward the poetically complex Emma, rather than an actual account of his character. In conclusion, the subtlety of Charles' intricate psyche is presented at various points of the novel before his personal epiphany at the end, but is only accessible with the reader’s accessibility to the quiet complexity of his motivations. Through Flaubert's efforts to depict him as a negative opposite for Emma, he unintentionally makes a more accessibly elaborate character for readers.