

Living with Life

by

Austin Che

English 4AP

Mrs. Lilly

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“The saddest thing of all, it seems to me, is to drag out, as I do, a useless existence. If our misfortunes were of use to someone, we could console ourselves with the thought of sacrifice.” (*Madame Bovary*, pp. 224-225)

Life is meaningless. We live and then die, our children live and then die and their children will live and then die. Even the solar system, the universe, and time will eventually cease to exist. We are an insignificant collection of atoms in the cosmos, which does not care much for its inhabitants. But some unknown force pushes us to remain as worthless bags of water in this unfriendly world rather than submit to the temptations of death. Why do we not jump from a bridge and avoid the troubles of life? Being dead is certainly less troublesome than trying to stay alive. Justifying living is a difficult task, making it easy to understand the allure of death.

*Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert presented several motivations for living. The life of the heroine, Emma, was imperfect and mediocre as life did not meet her expectations.

As for the rest of the world, it was lost, shadowy, and ill-defined, as if it did not exist. Besides, the closer things were, the more she turned her thoughts from them. Everything that immediately surrounded her, the dull countryside, imbecilic petty-bourgeois people, the mediocrity of existence, seemed to her an exception in the world, an unusual accident in which she found herself trapped, while beyond it the immense world of happiness and passion extended itself as far as the eye could see. (pp. 75-76)

Everything Emma touched seemed to become ordinary. She found her life boring and “cold as an attic” (p. 63), pushing her to search for the pleasures of love and life that were supposed to exist in life. “Emma sought to learn what was really meant in life by the words ‘happiness,’ ‘passion,’ and ‘intoxication’ — words that had seemed so beautiful to her in books” (p. 55). Emma needed love to live and to feel more than a random collection of quarks. Wanting immediate satisfaction of her passions, she tormented herself when she could not obtain it. “And then the fleshly appetites, desire for money, and the melancholy grip of passion combined into one agony” (p. 118). However, Emma’s encounters with her lovers, Leon and Rudolphe, only show that her love, and hence her life, was silly and rather meaningless. Love seemingly appeared from nowhere, and mysteriously vanished back to whence it came. Emma is like a blind man who wanders aimlessly around trying to find his way home, not realizing that he has never left the place he so desires to be. Life had always been under Emma’s feet, only waiting to be discovered.

Emma's blindness can explain how she managed to prolong her petty existence. Not seeing the gloominess of life, she instead gave life an attractive but artificial outfit. Emotions, fantasies, and love drove her life, leaving little for her to do, as she assumed that life would naturally be given to her. For Emma, life was like the theater with her in the seats cheering on the characters. When life did not perform the way she expected, she blamed the actors, writers, directors, and everyone but herself.

She felt that Providence was determined to hound her, and the thought strengthened her pride. Never had she had so much respect for herself or so much scorn for others. A kind of warlike emotion was transporting her. She wanted to fight all men, spit in their faces, crush them all. (p. 284)

Tired of the incompetence of the management, she finally opened her eyes and stepped on to the stage, taking control of her life. With this important step, she "discovered a crack in the wall" (p. 111), showing her the outside world for the way it was.

She had been so happy in those days! Days of freedom and hope, filled with illusions! There were no illusions left now. She had gradually spent them in all the adventures of her soul, in all her successive conditions, in her virginity, in her marriage, and in love; losing them continually as she grew older, like a traveler who leaves part of his money in every inn along the highway. (p. 172)

In this awakening, did she grasp some unique truth that could justify her existence? Improving ourselves is a necessary objective of living, since living only to die is not very useful. Though Emma had a very unhappy and unsuccessful life, she did learn and change, which may be a valid excuse for living. Her marriage with Charles, though the first major event in her life, was one of the last things Emma understood. Emma acknowledged Charles' love while on her deathbed, "Yes, I know. You're very good" (p. 295). She even learned and changed after her relationships with her lovers. Rudolphe, her first lover, taught her a few tricks that she skillfully applied in her relationship with Leon.

He did not argue about any of her notions; he accepted all her tastes, becoming her mistress rather than she being his. She offered tender words and kisses that drove him mad. Where, where had she learned this corruption, so deep and yet so disguised that it appeared almost disembodied? (p. 262).

Besides learning to be a better lover, Emma's relationships may have shown her a little bit of the naked truth behind men. The notary, Guillaumin, attempted to seduce Emma like Rudolphe successfully did at the fair, but Emma thought, "What a monster! What an unspeakable cad!" (p. 284). Was seeing and understanding the truth behind her disillusioned ideas about men, love, and life worth Emma's life? Many people are like Emma, following their passions and desiring what they do not and cannot have. This implies

that a great number of the lives present today will end as Emma's did with no meaning. Trying to find importance in her bland life, she turned towards her ideas of sacrifice and suffering. Like many people who have a high esteem of themselves, Emma felt that she was a benefit to society with what she believed to be her suffering.

How could she—she who was so intelligent!—have fooled herself one more time? Moreover, what deplorable main had made her ruin her life by these constant sacrifices? She recalled all her yearnings for luxury, all the privations to which she had subjected her soul, the sordidness of her marriage, of the household, her dreams falling into the mud like wounded swallows, everything she had wanted and denied herself, everything she could have had! Why? Why? (p. 182)

Emma blamed the world for being the way it was, and she took it upon herself to change it. Her greatest fear was living an ordinary life, but even her attempt to be extraordinary was ordinary. She wanted to model her life after the characters she had read in books, yet the very nature of the written word is the diffusion of ideas and the promotion of uniformity. Most people wish to feel special in some way, but that does not mean that they are special in any special way. Near her death, she finally understood her insignificance and her mistakes. Transferring the blame of her existence to herself may have been the most important event in her life. But even with all of Emma's personal discoveries, her life and death were of no consequence. After her death, the clocks still ticked, the politicians still embezzled, and men still chased married women. Life went on, as if Emma never existed. Why improve ourselves when no one cares? Instead of working for improvement, we could end our lives, saving ourselves from much suffering, arsenic, and wars.

Emma envied the peace that death would bring to her nonsensical life, but she had hopes for a better life. When she could not find a better life anywhere, she made one last desperate attempt to find contentment in death, but even Emma's death did not meet her expectations. "It's really quite simple to die,' she thought. 'I'll fall asleep and it will all be over'" (p. 294). Her gruesome and painful death shattered this last illusion, but she may have experienced at that last moment what she had been searching for so long.

She turned her head slowly and seemed suffused with joy at the sudden sight of the purple stole—probably rediscovering in this instant of extraordinary peace the lost ecstasy of her first flights of mysticism and beginning to have visions of eternal bliss.  
(p. 301)

The feeling that Emma felt as she was dying must have been sufficient for her to justify her death, and it makes us wonder why more people do not follow in Emma's path. Emma seems to be a child who can only learn by doing. Thus, she had to try adultery to understand passion, she had to live to understand life, and

she had to die to understand death. Even the blind beggar was able to justify his pitiful life, without dying. The difference between Emma and the beggar was that while the beggar knew and could accept that he was blind, Emma did not comprehend her condition and was shocked to see the truth. It took Emma's vivid imagination to portray life as worth living. Her misconceptions together formed a barrier to keep the unwanted truth away, keeping her alive. The truth hurts and Emma received a lethal dose of it. Reality killed her.

The role of Emma's husband, Charles, was substantially insignificant. He was a model of goodness, which had no practical use whatsoever. In his role as a devoted husband, Charles did not realize that Emma did not love him. "What exasperated her was that Charles did not seem to suspect her suffering. His conviction that he was making her happy seemed an imbecilic insult to her, and his smugness about it sheer ingratitude" (p. 118). Emma, not concerned with her love, only passionately needed to be loved. Differing from his wife, Charles relied on his love as support, rather than the love of others. The happiness he derived from loving Emma was the basis of his life. Reality was not as harsh to Charles since he had no expectations. While Emma waited for her dreams to reach her, Charles received his life from those around him. Charles became a doctor because his mother told him to become a doctor. He performed an operation because he was told to perform an operation. He lived because he was told to live. Thinking for himself rarely occurred to Charles, especially after marrying Emma and giving himself to her. Since everything seemingly came from the skies, he had no reason but to be grateful for his life. However, the mirage was shattered for him as it was for Emma. He eventually blamed what had previously been a wonderful life. "Fate is to blame" (p. 322), he uttered before his death. The views of Emma and Charles were switched by their respective lives. Emma began her life believing fate was to blame for her existence, but toward the end of her life she saw herself responsible. Charles, who lived never blaming others for his troubles, ended his life with the belief that the cosmos belonged in a mental institution. However Charles and Emma shared one thing. They were both purposeless pieces of meat. Charles' life was even more dull and useless than Emma's. He was an inept doctor wonderful at chopping off legs. While Emma's life and death did not have a significant influence on society, Charles' death may have benefited society with the removal of an incompetent doctor. However that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of some use to their

existence. Maybe their luckless daughter will become a great philosopher and solve the meaning of life. She could also just die.

Imagine a group of hungry turkeys. The most ambitious turkey in the group uses every effort to grab that last morsel of food that is fed to him, and consequently he grows fatter than the rest. But that turkey soon finds himself on the dinner table of hungry people unconcerned with the turkey's stunning accomplishments. Similarly, many people live to accomplish their goals, such as Homais with his wild ambitions. "But a secret ambition was gnawing at him. Homais wanted the cross of the Legion of Honor" (p. 320). Goals range from earning money to helping society. But the question remains of what reason exists to pursue these goals. We may be only proceeding to our doom no different from hungry turkeys. Even though the other turkeys may envy the fat turkey, the one that allows his hunger to run freely will have a quick end. The merchant, Lheureux, with all his capitalistic traits will die just as everyone else.

Lheureux in particular was dunning him. He had even, when Emma was at the critical point in her illness, taken advantage of the circumstance to increase his bill....Monsieur Lheureux resumed the attack and managed, by alternating whines and threats, to maneuver Bovary into signing a promissory note to be paid within six months. (p. 205)

Someone has to win and someone has to lose in life. Lheureux thinks that he is the winner, and the Bovarys the losers, but how can he be sure? It is like a man who decides to take a trip. This man acquires a suitcase, appropriate clothes, and accessories. But he is not satisfied, and he buys a bigger suitcase, better clothes, and fancier accessories. Only when he stops and thinks, does he realize that he does not know where he is going, leaving him with unusable luggage. Money is just a way to store life, allowing one to release it when wanted. However one needs a reason to want life, such as a place to go, or money would become unnecessary. There are some who live for the improvement of society, thinking of posterity and their happiness. Nevertheless, helping society is meaningless if we accept the senselessness of life. Helping people who have no reason to live is as pointless as acquiring wealth if one does not have a reason to live.

Some may find the limitless possibilities in life to be alluring and intriguing. Rudolphe was after Emma, not for the love, but for the spice it would add to his life.

"Poor little woman. Gasping for love, like a carp on a kitchen table gasping for water. Three flattering words and she'd adore me, I'm sure. How tender and charming it would be. But how would I get rid of her later?" (p. 137)

His goal was to make Emma love him, just like all his previous mistresses. Concern for reciprocating the love only went as far as making sure she loved him. “When he was sure of being loved, he stopped trying to please her, and his ways changed imperceptibly” (p. 170). Love and life for Rudolphe were “a collection of nonsense” (p. 197). Since life was nothing but nonsense, Rudolphe tried to squeeze out as much pleasure from the nonsense as possible. “Pleasures, like children in a schoolyard, had so trampled on his heart that nothing green could grow there” (p. 197). Similarly, the selfishness of Leon and his need to be happy drove his love for Emma. “It was one of those pure sentiments untroubled by the realities of life. One cultivates them because they are rare—and their loss would hurt more than the pleasure of possessing them” (p. 117). Undoubtedly, pleasure is a major objective of many people, but if life only consisted of pleasure, then what better way to gain pleasure than by death? If it is true that “We are born to suffer, as Saint Paul says” (p. 121), why do we live? With death, there would be no pain, no suffering, and no possibility of not being happy. The dead worry about nothing, care for nothing, and do not write essays. Life is so fragile. At any moment one could die or even worse, one may have to live not wanting to live. With death, one would have eternal bliss without ever having to fear of being brought back to life.

Life can be easily explained using religion. Religion has been a major foundation for life and may be the secret behind the survival of our pitiful race. Unable to find meaning in life by ourselves, we refer to higher authorities who give meaning to the concepts of life and death. With the multitude of religions, people listen to different gods and consequently believe in different things about our presence in the cosmos. What distinguishes a Buddhist from a Catholic? They both breathe, eat, sleep, and die, yet their fundamental beliefs differ greatly. The Buddhist would say that the Catholic is a non-believer while the Catholic would say that the Buddhist had been misled by the devil. Maybe neither of them is correct or maybe both of them are correct, but maybe it does not matter. Life is irrelevant and does not deserve our attention if we do not have the freedom to decide what we do. We would be nothing more than robots that could do nothing that it had not been programmed to do. Therefore to find meaning in life, we must assume that at least in some degree we can decide if we wish to walk, run, or crawl. The laws of science say that a ball will drop with such velocity when dropped from some height, but it does not have any answers for why there exists such a thing called a ball. Philosophy then tries to explain why the ball exists for us to perceive it. But life is not as simple as a page of equations or a set of definite beliefs. The comment that, “A man of

science cannot be bothered with the practical details of life” (p. 260), is certainly true since when scientists apply their equations to an object, it can no longer be called life. If the purpose of life can be written on a sheet of paper, then I refuse to live. On the other hand, philosophy is like the deaf man that answers the questions that no one has asked him. Even “death doesn’t frighten a philosopher” (p. 307), since the philosopher supposedly knows all, leaving nothing to be desired from life. Whatever we believe, we still have to live and life cannot be taught.

Reasons, whether real or imaginary, must exist to keep us moving toward whatever happens to be in our path. It may be happiness, love, pleasure, religion, or fish, but whatever the reason, it must be powerful enough to overcome the pleasantness of being asleep. The uniqueness of each individual guarantees the uniqueness of reasons, but is there no underlying, common thread that binds us to this fragile life? Could there be some higher law that we all follow? The possibility certainly exists of something mysterious beyond our comprehension, but finding it may prove to be our demise. Life is like the musical notes of a song. Currently, the notes are all mixed up with no apparent melody. Trying to put the notes in the correct order are the goals of science, philosophy, and history. When the order of the notes is solved, the message in the song would become clear, but then there would be nothing to do but find another song. Understanding life would leave nothing to be desired but death. What we know or think we know may not be any better than Emma’s fantasies. Maybe knowledge is our enemy. We are bound to lose if we try to face it, but in remaining ignorant we would not know what we were missing. Living is a losing battle, but as long as someone is willing to fight, there will be someone left to read this, and pass on what is learned, though futile it may be.