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Honors 3003 – Modernization and Its Discontent

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Individuality vs the Collective Good

Part VII: Unattainable Desires: The Achilles' heel of Individualism

The capitalistic economy and consumerism are one of the main driving forces for individuals in the current society. Individuals in today's world individuals seek to attain 'happiness' and 'peace,' and materialism has become an instrument for them in this quest. In order to become happy, they constantly attempt to satisfy themselves by striving for prosperity, pleasures, and peace. Yet, they are not content with their lives. Modern individuals tend to suffer from numerous conflicts, both internal and external, which results from their struggle to acclimate to the demands of society. Emma Bovary, the protagonist in Gustave Flaubert's tragic yet insightful novel *Madame Bovary*, exemplifies these conflicts that afflict the modern citizen. Emma Bovary's early development and Romantic inspirations, transformation following her contact with the wealthy class, subsequent unrestrained desire for materialistic and sensual pleasures, and constant regret at marrying a simple husband culminate into her ultimate psychological and physical demise. While Flaubert exposes suffering that a modern individual endures through his characterization of Emma Bovary, Sigmund Freud explores the causes of these sufferings and underlying motivations of individual desire, and suggests how one should live a less miserable life in his analytical work, *Civilizations and Its Discontents*.

Emma Bovary's childhood is set in a rural background and is marked by her fascination with mysterious desires. For example, although Emma was an astute religious student, most of

her actual interests derived from the Romantic aspects of religion. Instead of being immersed in rituals, she would “gaze in her book at the pious vignettes with their azure borders,” would be engaged by the “Sacred Heart [that was] pierced by sharp arrows” or by “poor Jesus, sinking beneath the weight of his cross” (Flaubert 33). Rather than focusing on the significance of these religious customs, her imagination would be captivated by heart-wrenching stories and aesthetic beauty. These Romantic ideas were further expanded by her fondness of reading novels. She would explore “exactly what was meant in real life by the words *felicity*, *passion*, and *rapture*, which had seemed so fine on the pages” of these novels (32). These novels would arouse themes like ‘love,’ ‘death,’ ‘aching hearts,’ and portray characters like “martyred maidens,” “nightingales,” and “*gentlemen* [as] brave as lions, tender as lambs, virtuous as a dream, [and] always well dressed” (34). These themes created a benchmark for her expectations and foreshadow her adult desires. Since Emma was raised in a rural background, most of her entertainment originated from these novels and quixotic imaginations. Although she had seemingly humble beginnings, seeds had been sown for her eventual demise because of several unattainable desires. In addition, Flaubert characterized modern individuals by exhibiting Emma’s internal motivation. Flaubert described her as someone who aimed to “extract personal profit” and “discard as useless anything that did not lend itself to her heart’s immediate satisfaction,” which reflected a “temperament more sentimental than artistic” (34). Similarly, in order to satisfy their desires, most modern individuals focus only on actions from which they can benefit from, whether that is economical, physical, or spiritual. If one continuously works to gain profit instead of enjoying the process itself, frustration and stress emerge as byproducts. This is a contradiction to the initial goal of being happy. All in all, Madame Bovary’s early motivations were the foundation for Romantic pleasures she would seek in her adulthood.

Emma's childhood interests blossomed after her visit to the ball, where she was lured by materialistic wealth. When she visited the city, she was mesmerized by the "noise of the streets, the buzzing theatres and the bright lights of the ballroom, the kind of life that opens up the heart" and "brings the senses into bloom" (42). Since she was brought up in a rural environment, her amazement was amplified at the hustle and bustle of the city and the urban lifestyle. In addition, she was attracted by wealthy individuals since "they had the complexion that comes with money, the clear complexion that looks well against the whiteness of porcelain, the lustre of satin, the bloom on expensive furniture, and is best preserved by a moderate diet of exquisite foodstuffs" (47). Her observations to specific details effectively portray the feeling of awe that she felt by the materialistic life. Her Romantic ideals flourished and materialistic bewilderment replaced her earlier fascination with religion and novels. This characteristic of Madame Bovary captivates the consumer culture of today's society. In today's materialistic culture, money, ambition, and the desire for possessions have become central in individuals' lives. The economic drive and the urge for fulfilling satisfactions have become the core interest today. The general belief is that economic prosperity will lead to a stable life, which will help in achieving all the other desires, materialistic, spiritual, and familial. This rationale makes money the sole focus and everything else to become secondary. Money might bring short-term pleasure, but it does not lead to long-term happiness. Overall, the attraction of wealth deluded Emma, similar to the characteristic of individuals in society today.

Although the exposure to the affluent city lifestyle captivated Emma, it was her self-reflections that completely transformed her life around. At the ball, while "she was eating a maraschino ice, holding the silver cockle-shell," she was wondering if "her past life" was "vanishing without a trace" (50). Servants and other poor individuals were helplessly trying to

break in from the outside which caused Emma to reflect on the “memories of Les Bertaux,” when she was once an outsider (50). She finally now had a chance to realize her dreams, and after the conclusion of the ball, she constantly longed for this experience again. She would remember “how far away it seemed already, the ball” and how this “force” had “made a hole in her life” (50). The “music from the ball was still buzzing in her ears,” and her memory of the “lovely ball gown,” the “ever satin slippers” was still vivid (50). In addition, “she made an effort to keep herself awake, so as to prolong the illusion of this world of luxury which she was so soon to relinquish” and exclaimed that the “contact with the rich had left [her life] smeared with something that would never fade away” (50). Instead of staying in the present and enjoying her time with Charles, she would reflect back to this event. This state of self-reflection describes a common mindset among discontented individuals in today’s society. Individuals have a difficult time balancing personal ambition, societal pressure, and religious life, which causes immense internal distress among them. Therefore, they are compelled to become attached to a few positive experiences, which provide them something else to focus on other than their own misery. Although reminiscing positive memories can generate momentary joy, it is also produces regret. If individuals continue to hold on to memories from the past, they will regret their current situation, which will make them even more miserable. Altogether, Madame Bovary’s internal strife due to regret and excessive self-reflection were decisive conflicts in her life that completely turned her life around.

Along with contemplation about her lifestyle, Emma became disenchanted with her husband, Charles. She claimed that his lifestyle became “routine; he embraced at the same time,” and created several habits like eating his “favourite pudding after the monotony of dinner” (41). She had lost the spontaneity in life with Charles. Her life “was as cold as an attic that

looks north,” full of “boredom, quiet as the spider”, which was “spinning its web in the shadowy places of heart” (42). She desired a man that “ought to know everything, excel in a host of activities, initiate [one] into the energies of passion, the refinements of life, all its mysteries,” but she claimed that Charles “knew nothing, taught nothing, desired nothing” (38). These expectations came from the Romantic novels of her childhood, where characters had exaggerated personalities. Instead of embracing Charles’s simplicity, she became increasingly alienated from him. The monotony of her life caused her to desire for more pleasures. Furthermore, her experience with wealthy individuals in the city widened the gap between her dissatisfaction with her husband and her internal desires. The Romantic ideals she imagined while she read her novels were not fulfilled with Charles, and this was the ultimate step that led to her affairs with Leon and Rodolphe, bankruptcy, and eventual suicide. Her disillusioned relationship with Charles reflects circumstances in today’s society. Instead of being satisfied with what one has, individuals always desire for more, which leads to unnecessary distress. Every individual has his or her own idea of happiness. If they reach that target, the individuals realize they are not as happy as they expected to be, and so they conceive another image of happiness. This is an endless cycle that never gets fulfilled, similar to Emma’s life. As a whole, her underappreciation for Charles and longing for more exacerbated her suffering, which was the ultimate step to her downfall. Altogether, societal pressure was not the main reason that brought upon Emma’s death; rather, it was her own delusional Romantic desires that led to her demise.

While *Madame Bovary* symbolizes the epitome of individual suffering, Freud analyzes why these problems are prevalent in today’s society. He describes life as being “too hard,” which “entails too much pain, too many disappointments,” “impossible tasks” (Loc 230). He investigates what causes human suffering and how individuals should live in society in order to

live a less miserable life. In order to dissect human suffering, Freud first explores the underlying motivation in human beings. He asserts that the “force behind all human activities is a striving towards the two convergent aims of profit and pleasure” (516). He claims that individuals “seek happiness” and “intense pleasures,” while they strive to eliminate “pain and discomfort” (230). He elaborates that the “pleasure-principle” and “unbridled gratification” is the “most alluring guiding principle in life” (230, 251). Freud furthers his argument by stating that individual “success is greatest” when an individual realizes “how to heighten” the probability of attaining “pleasure from mental and intellectual work” (290). Freud realizes that achieving happiness is not completely possible, but it is possible to lessen the degree of suffering. Madame Bovary personifies Freud’s ideology since her main driving force is the fulfillment of worldly desires and her motivation is to extract profit and pleasure from every experience due to her Romantic ideals. All in all, Freud argues that the main aim for an individual is to increase the ability to fulfill desires and decrease the probability of enduring hardships.

Along with illuminating on human motivation, Freud exhibits reasons for human suffering. He states that “suffering comes three quarters: from our own body,” “the outer world,” and the “relations with other men,” (241). According to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, these causes correspond to the three parts of consciousness—the id, ego, and superego. Suffering from one’s own body correlates to the unfulfilled desires that originate from the id, the underlying part of the consciousness that produces the ‘pleasure-principle.’ The id includes all uncontrolled desires and is associated with Eros and Thanatos, sexual pleasure and the death wish. On the other hand, the misery that arises from outer world interactions is due to the inability to control the ego, the part of the conscience that guides the unhindered id. Finally, the hardship that one faces from the relations with other men depends on the superego, the moral

compass of the human being. The morality of the individual and the animalistic desires, namely the super-ego and the id, are constantly combating each other and it is the ego that mediates this inner conflict and keeps an individual disciplined against others. If one can conquer all of these three components of consciousness, then suffering can be reduced. Madame Bovary's conflicted character can be explained through Freud's analysis of suffering. In the strife between Emma's super-ego and the id, it is the id that emerges victorious. Her unhindered sensual desires overcome the restraint of the simple housewife. In addition, the inability of her ego to curb her desires produces bankruptcy, affairs, and her eventual death. Furthermore, the two main Freudian principles that are embodied by Emma are the Eros and Thanatos principle. Throughout her life, she aspires to fulfill her Romantic desires, but when those desires become too frustrating to be fulfilled, she desires for the death wish and commits suicide. Therefore, Madame Bovary, who embodies the modern individual, also manifests the Freudian idea of suffering.

Along with exploring the relationship between pleasure and suffering, Freud aims to find a "solution between individual claims and those of the civilized community," which contributes to a "great part of the struggles of mankind" (546). He suggests that this circumstance occurs due to the "inadequacy of [individuals'] methods of regulating human relations in the family, the community, and the state" (388). He contends that the "so-called civilization itself is to blame for a great part of [their] misery, and [they] should be much happier if [they] were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions" (397). To resolve this issue, Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered several social contract theories to transition from the state of nature into civil society. Freud agrees by stating that although "voluntary loneliness" and "isolation from others" seem to be the "readiest safeguard against the

unhappiness that may arise out of human relations,” this is not a practical solution (251). Even though the state of nature might bring more happiness, it will also lead to greater degree of suffering. Therefore, individuals should find a way to survive in society. He claims that because of “the degree of privation that society imposes on them in virtue of its cultural ideals,” “men became neurotic” because they could not tolerate these standards (412). Emma Bovary adequately characterizes the deluded ‘neurotic’ by becoming seduced by the materialistic illusion because she could not bear the hardship of living a modern life. Instead of isolating oneself, Freud claims one should combine “with the rest of the human community and [take] up the attack on nature under the guidance of science” (257). He asserts that although individual “success is never certain,” it depends on the ability to “adapt [oneself] to the outer world and then utilize [it] for obtaining pleasure” (354). This is only possible “when a number of men unite together in strength superior to any single individual and remain united against all single individuals” because “the power of a united member for the power of a single man is the decisive step towards civilization,” (526, 531). The solution, according to Freud, is for the individual to relinquish some of his or her rights. He claims that “sublimation of instinct” “makes it possible for the higher mental operations, scientific, artistic, ideological activities, to play such an important part in civilized life” (566). It is important to note that the relationship between the individual and the society is mutual. Freud states that “it is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes” (566). Individuals will enhance their misery if they do not stay in society, and a society cannot prosper without a healthy cooperation among individuals. Although the sublimation of instinct might keep society together, it does not necessarily completely solve the problem. Emma’s relationship with Charles exemplifies this idea. Even

though she sublimated her instincts initially and stayed with Charles, it had negative consequences later with an explosion of romantic desires, which ended her life. In a Freudian view, if Emma had sublimated her desires adequately and had control over her ego, she would have survived. Although it is possible to renounce or limit all desires, it is improbable in today's world. Therefore, the Freudian solution is effective for the collective good, but is damaging to the individual if the individual does not sublimate the instinct completely. Altogether, in order for man to live a content life in society, he or she has to "exchange some part of his chances of happiness [for] a measure of security" (853).

As a whole, while Freud attempts to provide a template to resolve both internal and external conflicts of an individual by illuminating on the pleasure-principle, analyzing the sources of suffering, and exhibiting the ideal relationship between individuals and the society, the life of Madame Bovary illustrates these principles. The pleasure-principle dictates her lifestyle, and her unhindered desires aggravate the internal distress. Although her internal conflicts cause her to make unwise decisions, it is her inability to maintain a healthy relationship with others in society that causes her death. Madame Bovary's self-reflection and subsequent self-laceration corresponds to Kierkegaard's "Underground Man," who is present in everybody (Kierkegaard 307). Furthermore, Emma is the embodiment of the consumer and celebrity culture in today's society. The desire to receive instant and ceaseless gratification is clearly visible in today's culture. Everyone desires to have money, receive accolades, become popular, and own worldly possessions. Unhindered desire, though, has become the Achilles' heel of today's culture. If the desire is not fulfilled, then he or she becomes distressed. On the other hand, if the desires are fulfilled, then either the individual longs for more or has a superiority complex over others. Either way, uncontrolled desires have a negative impact. In addition,

although some individuals might become economically prosperous, they are not necessarily happy. In fact, some of the poorest individuals in the world are the happiest because their main source of pleasure is not attached with the ephemeral nature of materialistic possessions. All in all, although the consumer culture is necessary for the capitalistic economy, it could facilitate the downfall of individuals, and eventually society itself if it is not kept in control.

Several thinkers have tackled this complex issue regarding the relationship of individuals and society through a variety of perspectives. Immanuel Kant and Niccolò Machiavelli contemplated various approaches to maintaining a cooperative relationship between rulers and their subjects, while Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau proposed early theories that were precursors to present-day governments. Rousseau, Voltaire, and Adam Smith supported the development of human morality rather than scientific, philosophical, or economic enhancements, while Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx explored the impact of the relationship between individuals and society from the lens of democracy and economic prosperity. Lastly, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky portrayed how the ‘all or nothing’ mentality and the abstraction of the public causes individual suffering in this seemingly democratic society.

Individuals live in two spheres separately—the individual and the societal. Although these spheres do intersect, there is a unique aspect to each of them. An individual should be able to develop adequately with unrestrained freedom, while internal honesty should prevent him or her from committing injustice. When these two spheres collide, they do not have to produce a negative consequence. Man can fully develop on an individual basis, contribute to the society, and help maintain its peace at the same time. One should not have to limit individuality for the sake of social order; rather, both should be attainable (Part I: A Cooperative and Peaceful Civil Union: Practical or Quixotic?). In addition, an individual should pursue what he or she is

interested in regardless of societal expectations, and he or she should seek to provide for the greater good even if the service comes in the way of personal goals. Instead of choosing between the individual and societal sphere, both of these can coexist at the same time. It is not merited to sacrifice a specific personal trait or interest for the betterment of the society; on the contrary, it is the combination of both the personal and social characteristics of the individual that produces the best desired results. (Part IV: An Individual's Conflict with Society through the Lens of a Liberal Education).

Although individualism is necessary, it cannot be done without participation in society. Sacrificing societal cooperation, harboring suspicion, surrendering safety and peace, and renouncing guarantee of property is not worth it just for the sake of individual freedom. An individual should be willing to be able to provide for the greater good at his or her own expense. Humans are naturally inclined to help each other. If one helps another, they not only serve for the betterment of the community, but indirectly, the betterment of themselves (Part II: Individual Liberty: Worth Sacrificing for Public Safety and Reassurance?). One should seek morality rather than glory and attention. Ambition can be a powerful and dangerous weapon, but both the 'invisible hand' and the 'impartial spectator' should be employed at the same time for the best results. One cannot exist without the other. Therefore, an individual should possess enough ambition to strive and improve as a person but not an excess amount which can lead to major conflicts among individuals within society. Self-development is as an essential stepping stone towards achieving contentment, which should be the underlying objective of human endeavor instead of striving for impermanent materialistic wealth (Part III: The Path to Contentment: The Enlightenment's Move to Make Individuals Autonomous). Materialistic wealth, the consumer economy, and personal desires are the basis of the interaction between individuals and society.

If individuals renounce some of their desires for the betterment of the community, the society can be a better place. On the other hand, if materialistic wealth is the main goal for every individual, then both the individual and the society suffer (Part VII: Unattainable Desires: The Achilles' heel of Individualism).

These ideas are still relevant to today's society as well. Progress is ambiguous. Although it might positively impact certain fields, it can have detrimental effects on others. Maintaining balance is difficult. Even though science and technology have helped relief humanitarian problems, eradicated widespread diseases, and increased global communication, it has failed in generating lasting peace or ending political unrests. Democracy is the most practical and ideal way of governing society, but the danger to the democratic ideals is democracy itself (Part V: Human Progress: An Attainable Reality or a Deceptive Illusion?). Our society is moving towards a future where legal rights are continually gained, but internal peace slowly deteriorates. In order to resolve the paradox where the society suppresses individuals, we are in the process of creating another paradox where individuals suppress each other, and in the process, themselves. Although these conflicts cannot be resolved easily, the best way forward is to find a balance between the individual and the societal sphere (Part VI: The Rise of Equality and Alienation of Individuals).

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