

A Tale of Two Doctors – Lydgate, Bovary, and the Subsummation of the Medical Profession

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In *Madame Bovary* and *Middlemarch*, two medical catastrophes harm a doctor's career and reputation: The death of Raffles in *Middlemarch* and the operation on Hypollite's foot in *Madame Bovary*. These medical catastrophes present a blow to the marital relationships and social status of the respective doctors in contrasting ways. By examining the nature, the causes, and the consequences surrounding the error, we come to understand deeply more of the social and human relationships that affect a doctor's ability to practice. Additionally, by understanding the characters Charles and Lydgate from the two novels, we are also introduced to certain character attributes of doctors that may have exacerbated a medical error into one of a medical catastrophe.

When viewing the characters Charles and Lydgate in context of their profession, it becomes clear that Lydgate is the more serious and studious one in his treatment of his medical profession. Lydgate is described as this "young, poor, and ambitious" doctor who has come into Middlemarch to further the knowledge of medical practices and to make a name for himself in this rather small and ordinary town. The combination of those three traits "young, poor, and ambitious" serve to heighten the extreme motivation characterizing Lydgate's aspirations to become an exceptional doctor rather than a mediocre one. Meanwhile, Charles, during his youthful days of studying to become a doctor, skips out of lecture, choosing instead to play with dominoes in a rather dirty room. It comes as no surprise then that he failed his medical exam on his first try. With the overbearing support of his mother, he was finally able to find a place to practice medicine.

By the time Charles begins his profession, he exhibits the opposite of Lydgate's "young, poor, and ambitious" attributes. Charles begins his career by treating relatively easy medical cases, including the one on old Rouault, his father-in-law, which Charles could not have hoped for an easier case. This penchant towards "easier cases" illustrates Charles's natural complacency and his inability to further his abilities as a doctor by consequence of his complacency. Charles's complacency as a doctor is a driving factor for why the operation on Hypollite's foot goes awry.

While the case could be made that Charles's medical catastrophe is simply brought out by a matter of complacency, the real catastrophe of the operation on Hypollite's foot stems from several additional factors, chiefly Charles's misconceptions of what he is capable of. Had Charles simply recognized the limits of his own incompetence to operate on clubfoot as a doctor, he would not have proceeded to go through with the operation on Hypollite. Flaubert writes that Charles allowed himself to be persuaded by Monsier Homais when beginning the operation, and it is this very ability to be persuaded, to be deceived, that

proves to be the exact error that leads to Charles's initiating this medical catastrophe in the first place. Thus, we see how Charles's complacency in conjunction with his misconceptions concerning his actual abilities to practice medicine become the major flaws that account for the error resulting in medical catastrophe.

It is important at the same time to address the responsibility of other characters in causing this medical catastrophe, singularly Homais, Charles's assistant, who quickly and skillfully persuades Charles to attempt the surgery with Hippolite and largely orchestrates this operation by coaxing Hippolite to journey over to Charles's clinic to bring the two main individuals, patient and physician, together. Yet, we place the onus of blame on Charles rather than Homais because we see that Charles's predisposition for misconception is not an anomaly that just happens to manifest itself in just this one particular catastrophic operation but rather a systematic occurrence throughout the novel. For example, Charles's very own relationship with Emma Bovary and the social world is also one grounded in misconception. As evidence, we can look towards those scenes where Charles believes Emma to be taking piano lessons when she's gone, when in actuality, Emma is eloping with Rudolph. In this case, Charles has been deluded by Emma in thinking that she has been a perfect wife to him, a delusion that is met with tremendous shock once Charles uncovers the fees spurred by his wife over the course of her affairs with many men. Homais's role in the medical catastrophe is similar to Emma's role in Charles's failed relationship, as both act as agents who required Charles's misconceptions in order to bring about a true catastrophe.

On the other hand, Lydgate's medical catastrophe is brought about by his descent into the sordid politics and economics of Middlemarch. As a consequence of this, Lydgate is unable to stay true to his vision to change the medical landscape, and broadly, this lessening of human suffering. In this way, a specific difference between Charles and Lydgate is that Charles initially *begins* his medical career with complacency and misconception, but Lydgate *begins to develop* symptoms of complacency and misconception towards medicine by the end of the novel because he has grown accustomed to certain political and economic incentives that convenience him rather than bring him truer to his goals.

The exact error of Lydgate's medical catastrophe is more subtle in that Raffles's death is attributed more to intricate social occurrences outside of Lydgate's control. Particularly, Lydgate leaves the supervision of Raffles to Bulstrode. Eliot reveals Raffles to once be a business partner of Bulstrode and knows of Bulstrode's affair, particularly the scandalous revelation that Will Ladislaw is Bulstrode's grandchild. When presented with this information, we realize the conflict of interest. Bulstrode wishes for Raffles's death so that the rest of the people in the town will never have to hear about the scandal. The death of Raffles, therefore, prevents Bulstrode's humiliation and loss of public reputation in Middlemarch. Lydgate's inability to know of this web of scandal surrounding Bulstrode's relationship with Raffles is not entirely Lydgate's fault, but indicate how Lydgate has lost his sensitivity to who to trust and who to help, since Lydgate at this point relies entirely on Bulstrode to help finance personal debt and continue the operation of the hospital.

The events that have been leading up to the death of Raffles where Lydgate slowly and slowly sacrifices his autonomy for the political and economic benefits of Bulstrode's patronage is what ultimately made this particular event of Raffle's death catastrophic. During his tenure in Middlemarch, Lydgate has been currying favors with Bulstrode, compromising certain ideals he had for himself and the world in the interest of securing funding from

Bulstrode for his hospital that he hopes to change medicine for good. One such instance of this loss from personal conviction is seen in Lydgate's own decision to vote for Bulstrode rather than Farebrother in the local election. Here, Lydgate has compromised his beliefs for the simple fact that it will be of greater importance to receive the professional benefits and good graces from Bulstrode, despite his inner acknowledgment that Farebrother would be a better man for the job.

Moreover, this belief in the patronage of Bulstrode and his own determination to practice medicine using the newest learned and unorthodox ways earn him the ire of many doctors in his town, whose patients have been flocking to Lydgate. Lydgate imposes on himself a very precarious position where the entire community of Middlemarch is hostile to him but still allows him to continue practice because of his sheer competence. The situation is precarious because all it takes is just one misstep, one bad operation, and that's enough for the town to drive out Lydgate.

And a bad operation indeed. Once Lydgate makes this one failure with the death of Raffles, the damage is done. Although the true culprit for Raffles's death is Bulstrode for giving the key to his servants to let Raffles drink himself to death, Eliot makes clear that the true arbiter of right and wrong lies with the community of Middlemarch, and by consequence of Lydgate's prior actions, the community of Middlemarch is certain to condemn Lydgate over Bulstrode. Here we see how Lydgate's cater to Bulstrode for the economic and social benefits and freedom of operating his own hospital have left him remiss in developing loving relationships with the community at large. For all his wealth and social connections, Bulstrode simply cannot serve as a proxy for the general community of Middlemarch.

It is important to comment on how these events are not mere errors, but catastrophes, as in 'catastrophes' that highlight an utter ruin both socially and maritally. For Charles, the social and marital catastrophe is largely brought about the exaggerated high expectations everybody had of this operation with Hippolyte. Flaubert writes about the sensationalization of Charles's attempts to cure club-footedness before Charles even successfully cured it. Even Charles's wife looks on Charles with a newfound appreciation and better prospects before the surgery, surprised to notice Charles's teeth are 'straight.'

These high and lofty expectations are met with downright crushing failure. Just as how the initiation of Charles's surgery is widely published to be a revolution in medicine, so too is Hippolyte's unsuccessful surgery widely published to be a failure. Socially, Charles is ridiculed and maritally, Emma loses faith in Charles for what may be the final time, quickly leaving to take another, much longer excursion with Rudolphe. These social and marital catastrophes ultimately seem to reaffirm Charles's position as a mediocre, rather incompetent doctor, but these events are not so catastrophic as to lead to Charles to leave his town, as is the case with Lydgate. Instead, these events cement Charles's status in the medical world as one of true "incompetence," a status that Charles will have a hard time proving otherwise, leading Charles to only accept and internalize this complacency with his medical practice all the further.

Meanwhile, the social and marital catastrophe is quite severe for Lydgate, although to a different degree and of a varying flavor. Lydgate is unable to successfully earn the good graces of the Middlemarch community and his backing from Bulstrode is useless in light of recent rumors of Bulstrode's illegitimate heir. The catastrophe's social consequences afflict Lydgate more personally, as Lydgate realizes the extent to which the community

has deemed him an unfit doctor, a realization that Charles, unlike Lydgate, would have otherwise long accepted. These social pressures force Lydgate to leave. Maritally, he is no better than Charles, as persistent economic troubles and the inability to secure income from his profession leave Rosamund losing faith in Lydgate all the more. Seen in the entire social and marital catastrophe, the Death of Raffles brings to light Lydgate's own personal failings, particularly his inability to fulfill his medical aspirations because he has backed the wrong man in trying to secure short-sighted political, social, and economic benefits in the town of Middlemarch.

Both novels are able to touch upon two catastrophes of two men who practice medicine. Taken together, these novels show how a good doctor must work without complacency and without misconceptions, as witnessed by Charles's operation with Hippolyte. Additionally, a good doctor should disentangle from short-sighted political and economic opportunities and focus on just establishing a better, healthier relationship with the community at large, as seen with the social ostracism as a consequence of the death of Raffles in Lydgate's case. These two medical catastrophes, while unfortunate, present us with a better understanding of what it means to be a better doctor and a better human being. Therein lies the beauty in *Madame Bovary* and *Middlemarch*.