

**The Irony of Social Aspiration in Maupassant's
"The Necklace": A Study of Class, Materialism, and
the Construction of Identity in Nineteenth-Century
French Literature**

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Abstract

Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace" (1884) stands as one of the most celebrated short stories in French literature, written during a period of significant social and economic transformation in France. The Third Republic era (1870-1940) was marked by rapid industrialisation, urban expansion, and evolving class dynamics that created new anxieties about social mobility and material success. Against this historical backdrop, this article examines "The Necklace" as a masterwork of literary irony that

critiques bourgeois materialism and social stratification in Third Republic France. Through close textual analysis informed by sociological literary criticism, this study demonstrates how Maupassant employs dramatic irony, symbolic objects, and psychological realism to expose the destructive nature of social climbing and the artificial construction of class identity. The analysis reveals how the protagonist Mathilde Loisel's tragic pursuit of social advancement serves as a microcosm of broader societal anxieties about class mobility, authenticity, and the commodification of social status in post-revolutionary France. The article argues that Maupassant's narrative technique creates a sophisticated critique of both individual vanity and systemic social inequality, establishing the work as a foundational text in the literature of social realism.

Keywords: French Realism, Irony, Materialism, Maupassant, Social Class, Third Republic

1. Introduction

Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace" (1884), known in French as "La Parure," stands as one of the most anthologised and critically examined short stories in French literature. Within its concise narrative structure, Maupassant constructs a devastating critique of bourgeois society that continues to resonate with contemporary readers. The story's enduring appeal lies not merely in its famous twist ending but in its sophisticated exploration of class consciousness, material desire, and the psychological mechanisms that drive social aspiration.

Set against the backdrop of Third Republic France, the narrative follows Mathilde Loisel, a lower-middle-class woman whose obsession with social advancement leads to her ultimate downfall. This study examines how Maupassant's literary techniques serve to critique both individual vanity and the broader social structures that perpetuate class-based inequality in nineteenth-century French society.

2. Research Problem

2.1 Problem Statement

While "The Necklace" has been extensively anthologised and taught, existing scholarship has largely focused on either its technical merits as a short story or its moral implications regarding honesty and contentment. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how Maupassant's narrative techniques specifically function to critique the social and economic systems of Third Republic France.

2.2 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Maupassant employ irony as a literary device to critique bourgeois materialism and social stratification in "The Necklace"?
2. In what ways does the characterisation of Mathilde Loisel reflect broader anxieties

about class mobility and social authenticity in post-revolutionary France?

3. How do the symbolic elements in the story, particularly the necklace itself, function to expose the artificial nature of social distinctions?
4. What is the relationship between individual psychological realism and social critique in Maupassant's narrative technique?

2.3 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are to:

- Analyse the literary techniques employed by Maupassant to construct his social critique
- Examine the historical and social context that informs the story's themes
- Evaluate the symbolic framework that supports the narrative's ideological concerns

- Assess the story's contribution to the development of literary realism and social criticism

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach combining literary analysis with sociological criticism. The theoretical framework draws primarily from New Historicism, which examines the text within its historical and cultural context to understand how social forces shape literary production. Marxist Literary Criticism provides the analytical lens for examining class relations, material conditions, and economic determinants within the narrative. Feminist Literary Theory contributes to the investigation of gender roles and constraints within the social structure depicted in the story. Additionally, Formalist Analysis enables close reading of literary techniques, including irony, symbolism, and narrative structure, to understand how these elements contribute to the overall meaning and impact of the work.

3.2 Research Design

The methodology employs qualitative textual analysis as the primary research method. The approach encompasses close reading through detailed examination of the text, focusing on narrative techniques, characterisation, and symbolic elements. Contextual analysis involves investigation of historical and social context through primary and secondary sources to situate the work within its broader cultural milieu. Comparative analysis examines the work within the broader context of French realist literature to understand its position within the literary tradition. Finally, interpretive analysis synthesises findings to develop coherent arguments about the text's social critique and its significance within the broader framework of nineteenth-century French literature.

3.3 Data Sources

Primary sources include Guy de Maupassant's original French text of the story, contemporary reviews and

criticism from the 1880s that provide insight into the work's initial reception, and Maupassant's correspondence and essays on literary technique that illuminate his artistic intentions and methods. Secondary sources encompass scholarly articles on Maupassant and French realism that provide critical perspectives on the author's work and its place within the literary tradition, historical studies of Third Republic France that contextualise the social and political conditions reflected in the story, and critical theories relevant to literary analysis that provide methodological frameworks for interpreting the text's meaning and significance.

3.4 Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds through a systematic examination of multiple textual and contextual elements. Narrative structure and point of view are analysed to understand how Maupassant constructs his story's impact and meaning. Character development and psychological

portraiture receive detailed attention to reveal how individual psychology reflects broader social conditions. Symbolic elements and their cultural significance are examined to understand how material objects function as carriers of social meaning. Language use and stylistic techniques are scrutinised to appreciate the author's craft and its contribution to the work's thematic development. Historical and social context provides the framework for understanding how the story engages with the specific conditions of Third Republic France and their impact on individual and collective experience.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Historical Context of Third Republic France

The Third Republic (1870-1940) marked a period of significant social transformation in France, characterised by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and the emergence of a more fluid class system. Charle (1991) demonstrates how the traditional aristocratic order had been disrupted

by the Revolution of 1789 and subsequent political upheavals, creating opportunities for social mobility while simultaneously generating anxiety about class boundaries and authentic identity.

Weber's (1976) seminal work on the modernisation of rural France provides crucial context for understanding the social tensions reflected in Maupassant's fiction. The period saw increasing urbanisation and the growth of a consumer culture that emphasised material display as a marker of social status. This transformation created particular pressures on the emerging middle class, who found themselves caught between traditional aristocratic values and modern commercial society.

4.2 Maupassant and Literary Realism

Maupassant's position within the French realist tradition has been extensively documented. Cogny (1988) traces his development under the influence of Gustave Flaubert, emphasising how Maupassant absorbed the older

writer's commitment to precise observation and objective presentation. However, Sullivan (1962) argues that Maupassant's realism differs from Flaubert's in its greater attention to social rather than psychological analysis.

The relationship between Maupassant and the naturalist movement has been a subject of scholarly debate. Lerner (1975) contends that while Maupassant shared Zola's interest in social determinism, he remained sceptical of naturalism's scientific pretensions. This scepticism, Lerner argues, enabled Maupassant to develop a more nuanced approach to social critique that avoided the didactic tendencies of strict naturalism.

4.3 Critical Interpretations of "La Parure"

Early criticism of "La Parure" focused primarily on its technical mastery and moral implications. Vial (1954) praised the story's structural perfection and its use of irony to create a memorable conclusion. However, this approach tended to treat the work as a moral fable rather than a sophisticated social critique.

More recent scholarship has emphasised the story's engagement with questions of class and gender. Adamson (2003) examines how the story anticipates contemporary concerns about consumer culture and the commodification of social identity. Her analysis demonstrates how Mathilde's pursuit of social status through material consumption reflects broader patterns in modern capitalist society.

Feminist critics have particularly focused on the gendered dimensions of Mathilde's social constraints. Donaldson-Evans (1986) argues that the story reveals the limited options available to women in nineteenth-century French society, where social advancement necessarily involved the performance of feminine attractiveness within prescribed social contexts.

4.4 Symbolic and Thematic Analysis

The symbolic significance of the necklace has attracted considerable critical attention. Luscher (1999) interprets

the necklace as a symbol of the illusory nature of social distinctions, arguing that its artificial nature reflects the artificial nature of class boundaries themselves. This interpretation has been developed by poststructuralist critics who see the story as demonstrating the constructed nature of social reality.

Neuschafer (1980) offers a different interpretation, focusing on the necklace as a symbol of feminine desire and its social construction. His analysis emphasises how the story reveals the psychological mechanisms through which social inequality perpetuates itself, particularly through the internalisation of dominant cultural values.

4.5 Gaps in Existing Literature

While existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into various aspects of "The Necklace," several gaps remain:

1. Limited analysis of how specific literary techniques function to construct social critique

2. Insufficient attention to the story's historical specificity and its relationship to Third Republic social conditions
3. Lack of comprehensive examination of the relationship between individual psychology and social structure in the narrative
4. Need for more sophisticated analysis of the story's contribution to the development of literary realism

This study aims to address these gaps through detailed textual analysis informed by historical and sociological perspectives.

5. Discussion

5.1 Narrative Structure and Ironic Framework

Maupassant's mastery of the short story form is evident in his precise construction of "The Necklace." The narrative follows a classical dramatic arc, with exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution compressed into approxi-

mately 2,000 words. This economy of form serves the story's thematic purposes, as the compressed timeframe mirrors the sudden reversal of fortune that befalls the protagonist.

The story's structure can be divided into three distinct phases: Mathilde's initial discontent and preparation for the ball, the night of the ball itself, and the ten-year period of hardship that follows the necklace's loss. This tripartite structure creates a symmetrical narrative that emphasises the contrast between Mathilde's dreams and reality, between her momentary triumph and lasting punishment.

Central to the story's impact is Maupassant's deployment of dramatic irony. The reader, like Mathilde, remains unaware of the necklace's true value until the story's conclusion. This shared ignorance creates a powerful bond between the reader and the protagonist, making the final revelation both shocking and inevitable. The irony extends beyond the simple fact of the necklace's worthlessness to

encompass the entire system of values that Mathilde has internalised and pursued.

Through a New Historicist lens, this narrative structure reflects the broader historical tensions of Third Republic France, where rapid social transformation created unstable class boundaries that could be traversed momentarily but not permanently altered without substantial material foundation. The compressed temporal structure mirrors the accelerated pace of social change during this period, while the ironic reversal embodies the uncertainty and instability that characterised class mobility in post-revolutionary French society.

5.2 Character Analysis: Mathilde Loisel as Social Critique

Mathilde Loisel functions as both an individual character and a representative figure of bourgeois aspiration. Maupassant's initial description establishes her as a woman "born into a family of clerks" who feels herself "destined

for all delicacies and luxuries." This sense of entitlement, divorced from any corresponding social position or means, establishes the central tension that drives the narrative.

The author's psychological portraiture reveals Mathilde's complex relationship with her social position. She experiences her middle-class existence as a form of imprisonment, viewing herself as a victim of circumstance rather than an agent of her destiny. This victimisation complex blinds her to the genuine affection of her husband and the modest comforts of her actual life, creating a psychological state in which fantasy becomes more real than reality.

Mathilde's characterisation serves Maupassant's broader social critique by illustrating how the pursuit of social advancement can become a form of self-alienation. Her obsession with external markers of status—dress,

jewellery, social recognition—prevents her from developing any authentic sense of self-worth. The irony of her situation is that in pursuing the appearance of higher social standing, she ultimately loses even the modest security she originally possessed.

From a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, Mathilde embodies the petit bourgeois consciousness trapped between classes—neither possessing the economic capital of the upper bourgeoisie nor accepting the material conditions of her actual class position. Her false consciousness manifests in her belief that social mobility can be achieved through consumption and appearance rather than through transformation of material conditions. This alienation from her authentic class position reflects Marx's concept of how capitalist social relations create psychological estrangement, where individuals become disconnected from both their labour and their genuine social relationships.

5.3 Symbolism and Material Culture

The necklace itself functions as the story's central symbol, representing both the allure and the hollowness of social aspiration. Its apparent value creates the illusion of transformed identity—when Mathilde wears it, she becomes "the prettiest woman at the ball." However, this transformation is revealed to be as artificial as the necklace itself, highlighting the superficial nature of social distinctions based on material display.

The symbolic significance of the necklace extends to its role as a commodity that mediates social relationships. Mathilde's borrowing of the necklace from her wealthy friend Madame Forestier establishes a power dynamic that reflects broader class relationships. The necklace becomes a temporary bridge between social classes, allowing Mathilde to perform a higher social status while remaining fundamentally unchanged in her actual circumstances.

Maupassant's attention to material details throughout the story reinforces this critique of commodity fetishism. The elaborate description of Mathilde's preparations for the ball, from her dress to her accessories, demonstrates how social identity becomes constructed through consumption. The author's precise cataloguing of these material elements serves to emphasise their ultimate insignificance in the face of authentic human values.

Through Marxist analysis, the necklace represents the fetishisation of commodities that Marx identified as central to capitalist social relations—objects that appear to possess inherent social value while concealing the labour relations that produce them. The necklace's artificial nature mirrors the artificial nature of class distinctions themselves, which appear natural and inevitable but are actually constructed through material relations and social practices. The exchange of the necklace between Mathilde and Madame Forestier demonstrates how bourgeois social relationships become

mediated through commodity exchange rather than authentic human connection.

5.4 Gender and Social Constraint

The story's exploration of class intersects significantly with questions of gender and social constraint. Mathilde's limited options for social advancement reflect the restricted opportunities available to women in nineteenth-century French society. Her beauty becomes her primary social asset, and her pursuit of status necessarily involves the performance of feminine attractiveness within prescribed social contexts.

The ball sequence reveals both the possibilities and limitations of this gendered form of social mobility. Mathilde's triumph at the ball demonstrates her ability to successfully perform upper-class femininity, but this success is necessarily temporary and depends entirely on borrowed materials. The story thus critiques not only class-based inequality but also the gender system that limits women's agency to the sphere of social performance.

Mathilde's ten-year period of hardship following the ball represents a different kind of gendered experience—the grinding domestic labour that constitutes the hidden foundation of middle-class respectability. Her transformation from social aspirant to domestic labourer reveals the economic realities that underlie social distinctions, while also suggesting the possibility of authentic identity emerging through genuine work rather than social performance.

Feminist Literary Theory illuminates how Mathilde's constrained agency reflects the patriarchal structures of Third Republic France, where women's social mobility was necessarily mediated through their relationships with men and their performance of acceptable femininity. Her beauty and charm become forms of cultural capital that can be temporarily deployed but cannot provide sustainable social advancement without economic foundation. The story reveals how gender and class oppression intersect, creating double constraints that limit women's options

for authentic self-determination. Mathilde's eventual transformation through labour suggests the possibility of liberation through productive work, though this remains circumscribed by her continued economic dependence.

5.5 Social Class and Economic Determinism

Maupassant's treatment of social class in "La Parure" reflects his understanding of how economic forces shape individual psychology and social relationships. The story demonstrates how class position creates specific forms of consciousness that can become self-destructive when they conflict with material reality.

Mathilde's middle-class position creates a particular form of social anxiety—she possesses enough education and cultural capital to aspire to higher social standing, but lacks the economic means to achieve it. This contradiction generates the psychological tension that drives the narrative, as her aspirations consistently exceed her material circumstances.

The story's economic determinism is most evident in its treatment of the consequences of Mathilde's deception. Her ten-year period of poverty is not simply a moral punishment for vanity, but a realistic portrayal of how economic necessity shapes human behaviour. The grinding labour she endures reveals the material foundation of social distinctions, while also demonstrating the limited options available to those without economic resources.

New Historicism contextualises Mathilde's class anxiety within the specific conditions of Third Republic France, where traditional aristocratic hierarchies had been disrupted but new forms of social stratification based on wealth and consumption had not yet solidified. This historical moment created particular opportunities and anxieties for the emerging middle class, who found themselves navigating between traditional status markers and modern commercial values. The story captures this transitional moment, revealing how individual psychology

becomes shaped by broader historical forces and social transformations.

5.6 Psychological Realism and Social Critique

Maupassant's integration of psychological realism with social critique represents one of the story's most sophisticated achievements. The author's penetrating analysis of Mathilde's psychological state serves not only to create a compelling character study but also to illuminate broader social processes.

The story's psychological realism is evident in its detailed portrayal of Mathilde's internal experience. Her fantasies about luxury and social recognition are presented with sufficient detail to make them psychologically credible, while also revealing their ultimately destructive nature. This psychological depth prevents the story from becoming a simple moral fable, instead creating a complex portrait of how social conditions shape individual consciousness.

The relationship between psychology and social critique is most evident in the story's treatment of desire and aspiration. Mathilde's desires are not presented as inherently pathological, but as the predictable result of social conditions that create aspirations without providing means for their fulfilment. This analysis anticipates modern sociological understanding of how social structure influences individual behaviour.

Formalist Analysis reveals how Maupassant's technical mastery serves his ideological purposes. The story's precise narrative structure, with its careful development of character psychology and symbolic framework, creates a unified artistic vision that integrates individual experience with social analysis. The author's use of free indirect discourse allows readers to experience Mathilde's consciousness while maintaining critical distance, creating the conditions for both empathy and critique. This technical achievement demonstrates how literary form itself can become a vehicle for social analysis, as the

story's aesthetic structure embodies its thematic concerns about the relationship between appearance and reality, individual desire and social constraint.

6. Conclusion

Guy de Maupassant's "La Parure" achieves its enduring power through its sophisticated integration of individual psychology with social critique. The story's famous ironic reversal serves not merely as a plot device but as a structural element that reinforces the author's analysis of how social aspiration can become a destructive force when divorced from authentic self-knowledge.

The narrative's exploration of class, gender, and material culture reveals the complex mechanisms through which social inequality perpetuates itself, while its psychological realism demonstrates how individual desires become shaped by systemic social forces. Mathilde Loisel's tragedy becomes representative of broader social contradictions that continue to characterise modern consumer societies.

This analysis has demonstrated how Maupassant's literary techniques—particularly his use of irony, symbolism, and psychological realism—function to construct a sophisticated critique of Third Republic French society. The story's technical mastery serves its ideological purposes, creating a work that operates simultaneously as an aesthetic achievement and social analysis.

The story's continued relevance suggests that Maupassant's insights into the relationship between individual psychology and social structure remain pertinent to contemporary analyses of class, consumption, and social identity. "La Parure" thus stands as both a masterpiece of literary craft and an enduring contribution to the critical analysis of modern social life, demonstrating the capacity of literary art to illuminate the complex relationships between individual experience and social structure.

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