

**THE NECKLACE**  
**BY**  
**GUY DE**  
**MAUPASSANT**

A Critical Analysis

# INTRODUCING GUY DE MAUPASSANT

- ◉ **An eminent French writer** of short stories, novels, and poetry
- ◉ **Also Known As:** Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant, Guy de Valmont, Joseph Prunier, Maufrigneuse
- ◉ **Born:** August 5, 1850 in Tourville-sur-Arques, France
- ◉ **Parents:** Laure Le Poittevin, Gustave de Maupassant
- ◉ **Died:** July 6, 1893 in Passy, Paris, France
- ◉ **Education:** Institution Leroy-Petit, in Rouen, Lycée Pierre-Corneille in Rouen
- ◉ **Published Works:** *Boule de Suif, La Maison Tellier, The Necklace, A Piece of String, Mademoiselle Fifi, Miss Harriet, My Uncle Jules, Found on a Drowned Man, The Wreck, Une Vie, Bel-Ami, Pierre et Jean*

# MAJOR THEMES

## Illusions and Superficialities

- ◉ The reality of Mathilde's situation is that she is neither wealthy nor part of the social class of which she feels she is a deserving member, but Mathilde does everything in her power to make her life appear different from how it is. She lives in an illusory world where her actual life does not match the ideal life she has in her head—she believes that her beauty and charm make her worthy of greater things. The party is a triumph because for the first time, her appearance matches the reality of her life. She is prettier than the other women, sought after by the men, and generally admired and flattered by all. Her life, in the few short hours of the party, is as she feels it should be. However, beneath this rightness and seeming match of appearances and reality is the truth that her appearance took a great deal of scheming and work. The bliss of her evening was not achieved without angst, and the reality of her appearance is much different than it seems. Her wealth and class are simply illusions, and other people are easily deceived.

# MAJOR THEMES

## ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

- ◉ The deceptiveness of appearances is highlighted by Madame Forestier's necklace, which appears to be made of diamonds but is actually nothing more than costume jewelry. The fact that it comes from Madame Forestier's jewelry box gives it the illusion of richness and value; had Monsieur Loisel suggested that Mathilde wear fake jewels, she surely would have scoffed at the idea, just as she scoffed at his suggestion to wear flowers. Furthermore, the fact that Madame Forestier—in Mathilde's view, the epitome of class and wealth—has a necklace made of fake jewels suggests that even the wealthiest members of society pretend to have more wealth than they actually have. Both women are ultimately deceived by appearances: Madame Forestier does not tell Mathilde that the diamonds are fake, and Mathilde does not tell Madame Forestier that she has replaced the necklace. The fact that the necklace changes—unnoticed—from worthless to precious suggests that true value is ultimately dependent on perception and that appearances can easily deceive.

# MAJOR THEMES

## SPURIOUS MARTYRDOM

- Mathilde's perception of herself as a martyr leads her to take unwise, self-serving actions. The Loiseles live, appropriately, on the Rue des Martyrs, and Mathilde feels she must suffer through a life that is well beneath what she deserves. Unable to appreciate any aspect of her life, including her devoted husband, she is pained by her feeling that her beauty and charm are being wasted. When Mathilde loses the necklace and sacrifices the next ten years of her life to pay back the debts she incurred from buying a replacement, her feeling of being a martyr intensifies. She undertakes the hard work with grim determination, behaving more like a martyr than ever before. Her beauty is once again being wasted; this work eventually erases it completely. Her lot in life has gotten worse, and Mathilde continues to believe she has gotten less than she deserves, never acknowledging the fact that she is responsible for her own fate. Her belief in her martyrdom is, in a way, the only thing she has left. When Madame Forestier reveals that the necklace was worthless, Mathilde's sacrifices also become worthless, and her status as a martyr—however dubious—is taken away entirely. At the end of the story, Mathilde is left with nothing.

# MAJOR THEMES

## PERCEPTION IS THE KEY

- ◉ Mathilde believes that objects have the power to change her life, but when she finally gets two of the objects she desires most, the dress and necklace, her happiness is fleeting at best. At the beginning of “The Necklace,” we get a laundry list of all the objects she does not have but that she feels she deserves. The beautiful objects in other women’s homes and absence of such objects in her own home make her feel like an outsider, fated to envy other women. The things she does have—a comfortable home, hot soup, a loving husband—she disdains. Mathilde effectively relinquishes control of her happiness to objects that she does not even possess, and her obsession with the trappings of the wealthy leads to her perpetual discontent. When she finally acquires the dress and necklace, those objects seem to have a transformative power. She is finally the woman she believes she was meant to be—happy, admired, and envied. She has gotten what she wanted, and her life has changed accordingly. However, when she loses the necklace, the dream dissolves instantly, and her life becomes even worse than before. In reality, the power does not lie with the objects but within herself.
- ◉ In contrast to Mathilde, Madame Forestier infuses objects with little power. Her wealth enables her to purchase what she likes, but more important, it also affords her the vantage point to realize that these objects are not the most important things in the world. She seems casual about, and even careless with her possessions: when Mathilde brazenly requests to borrow her striking diamond necklace, she agrees. And later, when Mathilde informs her that the necklace in her possession is actually extremely valuable, she seems more rattled by the idea that Mathilde has sacrificed her life unnecessarily. The fact that Madame Forestier owned fake jewels in the first place suggests that she understands that objects are only as powerful as people perceive them to be. For her, fake jewels can be just as beautiful and striking as real diamonds if one sees them as such.

# NECKLACE AS A METAPHOR

- The necklace symbolizes wealth, beauty, vanity, deception, illusion, false values, high society, and, ultimately, shame, as she loses the necklace and goes into debt to replace it.
- The great irony of the story is that the necklace was a fake. Mathilde spends ten years in debt, effectively ruining her life over nothing. They work and slave for ten years to pay for a replacement necklace that was only worth about five hundred francs. Not only that, but Mathilde loses her beauty, grace, charm, and even her dreams during that terrible time.

# SOCIAL CLASS

- ◉ Works of Literary Realism often focus on the theme of social class, and "The Necklace" is certainly an example of this. Mme. Loisel's greatest concern is her own social class, especially the way she is perceived in society in virtue of her appearance and attire. It is her focus on social class that causes her to borrow a necklace to wear to a party to which she and her husband have been invited; in an ironic twist, this very necklace results in them becoming even lower in social class when they lose it and must work to pay for a replacement.

# REAL GRACE

- This short story questions whether beauty is inherent or rather imbued in something in virtue of its social value. One example of this is Mme. Loisel's reaction when she sees Mme. Forestier's necklace: even though it is made of fake jewels, her belief that it is made of real diamonds causes her to quake from its beauty. Another example is Mme. Loisel herself. At the party, Mme. Loisel feels beautiful and is desired by many men at the party because of her beauty. However, it is unclear whether she would have been considered beautiful without the necklace and whether perhaps her beauty came from the confidence that the necklace gave her.

# CONTENTMENT IS ALL

- One surprisingly uplifting theme of this short story is the fact that it seems happiness comes from being content with whatever one has. When Mme. Loisel has a middling social status but desires to be higher in society, she spends her days yearning and weeping. However, once she and her husband have been driven to toil for ten years, she seems content and sometimes nostalgic, happier than she was before. In fact, when she tells Mme. Forestier of the work she has done for ten years to pay off the replacement necklace, Maupassant writes that she "smiled with a proud and simple joy"(p.38).

# ETHICAL ENDING

- Like the cut-glass gems in the necklace for which the story "The Necklace" is named, Madame Loisel's life is a fraud. She places no value on her humble existence, her husband, her station in life, and instead only finds contentment in dreams of glamor and refinement. Her story is a cautionary tale that superficial luxuries and pleasantries aren't always what they seem. The dogged pursuit of these can leave you empty in the end.