Guy de Maupassant

Guy de Maupassant was born to a wealthy family in Tourville-sur-Arques, France, in 1850. Maupassant demonstrated an early interest in literature as a high school student in Rouen, where he began writing poetry and acted in several plays. In 1867, he was introduced to the prominent French novelist Gustave Flaubert, who took the young Maupassant under his wing and encouraged him to study law in Paris. His education was interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, during which time Maupassant served as an officer in the artillery corps. After the war, Maupassant returned to Paris where Flaubert introduced him to other important novelists in the realist and naturalist schools, including Émile Zola, Ivan Turgenev, and Edmond de Goncourt. It was also during this period that Maupassant began his career as a journalist, devoting his spare time to writing novels and short stories. In 1880 Maupassant published his first masterpiece, “Boule de suif,” a short story inspired by his involvement in the Franco-Prussian war that catapulted the

young author into literary celebrity. Over the next ten years Maupassant wrote prodigiously, earning wealth for himself and admiration from his contemporaries: Leo Tolstoy called Maupassant's first novel *One Life* "the best French novel since [Victor] Hugo's *Les Misérables*." Maupassant was especially well-known for his short stories, which were notable for their pessimistic take on human and social life. In his later years Maupassant began to suffer from extreme paranoia and other health complications, probably due to the syphilis that he had contracted in youth. After a failed suicide attempt in 1892, he was committed to an asylum in Paris where he died in 1893.

Historical Context

The work of Realist writers is generally seen as a reaction to the idealism of the Romantic period. Instead of focusing on emotion and subjectivity like the Romantics, Realist writers were more interested in objective descriptions of reality. Works of Realist literature often depict characters from middle or lower class society involved in everyday activities, rather than the heroic aristocrats of Romantic works . Stylistically, "The Necklace" is a classic example of Realist literature. In addition, "The Necklace" takes place in late-nineteenth century Paris, a highly unequal and class-based society. The upper classes were populated by wealthy and powerful capitalists, leaving very little room for the rest of the population. "The Necklace" faithfully depicts this extreme inequality as Mathilde Loisel moves between the upper and lower classes.

Key Facts about *The Necklace*

- **Full Title:** *The Necklace*
- **When Written:** 1884
- **Where Written:** Paris
- **When Published:** 1884
- **Literary Period:** Literary realism
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** Paris, France, in the late 1800s
- **Climax:** The lost necklace that Mathilde Loisel spends ten years trying to pay for is revealed to be a fake.
- **Internal Conflict:** Mme. Loisel vs. herself (her excessive pride, materialism and shallowness cause her emotional torture as she feels she's been deprived of luxuries)
- **External conflict:** Mme. Loisel vs. Mr. Loisel (different values; although he is tolerant of her behavior and wants to please her)
- **Point of View:** Third person

Characters

Mathilde Loisel is the daughter of a middle-class family and is married to M. Loisel. A remarkably beautiful woman, Mathilde is perpetually dissatisfied with her lot in life, constantly dreaming of the glamour and riches to which she feels her beauty entitles her. Mathilde finally has a chance to live her dreams when she and her husband receive an invitation to a party from the Minister of Education, and she borrows a diamond necklace from her friend Jeanne Forestier in order to look her best at the party. Mathilde is a huge success at the ball but disaster strikes when she loses the necklace during the carriage ride home. She and her husband spend the next ten years struggling to pay for an expensive replacement, and Mathilde's beauty fades as she experiences the hardships of poverty. When she runs into Mme. Forestier on the Champs Elysée, Mathilde is proud to tell her that the debt has finally been paid off, only to discover that the necklace she replaced was made of paste. Mathilde's primary character traits are her beauty, her vanity, and her social ambition, all of which play their part in leading her to her ruin.

M. Loisel is married to Mathilde and works as a clerk in the Ministry of Education. He cares very much for his wife, and it is to make her happy that he procures an invitation to the party hosted by the Minister of Education. M. Loisel's generosity contrasts sharply with his wife's vanity and selfishness. For instance, he sacrifices his dream of buying a rifle to go hunting with his friends on the plains of Nanterre in order to buy a new dress for Mathilde. He searches tirelessly for the necklace when it is lost, and he sacrifices his inheritance, his honor, and takes on an enormous amount of debt to replace it.

Mme. Forestier is a well-to-do friend of Mathilde's from her convent-school days. She has a marvelous collection of jewelry and lets Mathilde borrow an expensive-looking necklace for the party. Mathilde loses and replaces the necklace but Mme. Forestier does not notice the substitution, although she is annoyed that her friend took so long to return the jewelry. Ten years later, Mme. Forestier barely recognizes Mathilde when they run into each other on the Champs Elysées, and is dismayed to inform her that the necklace that Mathilde sacrificed ten years of her life to replace was in fact made of paste. The fact that Mme. Forestier owns a fake necklace despite being wealthy enough to afford a real one shows that she understands the illusory nature of class and status.

Summary and Analysis

Mathilde Loisel is a pretty and charming woman who was born, “as if through some blunder of fate,” into a middle-class family. Without a dowry or a point of entry into high society, she is unable to find a wealthy husband, and so she marries M. Loisel, a clerk who works for the Ministry of Education.

The opening lines of “The Necklace” introduce Mathilde as an exceptionally beautiful woman with an ordinary social situation. From this starting point, the reader can anticipate the link between beauty and social ambition that will be explored throughout the rest of the story.

Though Mathilde has always been middle-class, she grieves as though she is actually a woman who has “come down in the world.” Perhaps this is natural for beautiful and charming women like Mathilde, as for women “their beauty, their grace, and their charm serve them in lieu of birth and family background.” Appearance and poise, then, can make beautiful women without means the “equals of the grandest ladies.”

By claiming that beautiful women without means can be the “equals of the grandest ladies,” Maupassant suggests wealth and social status can be earned by beauty. Mathilde completely buys into this idea, which leads her to be dissatisfied with her modest life.

Mathilde is therefore constantly unhappy because instead of the “delicacies” and “luxuries” for which she believes she was born, her life is shabby. Though another woman of her class wouldn’t even notice, she is dismayed by the sight of her unfashionable apartment and her humble maid, preferring to lose herself in daydreams of “hushed antechambers with Oriental hangings” and “large drawing rooms lined with ancient silk.”

Mathilde’s unhappiness stems from a false set of expectations. Because she is beautiful, Mathilde believes she is entitled to the glamorous life of the rich and is driven to despair by her humble surroundings. To escape this reality, Mathilde loses herself in a world of dreams and illusions where she surrounds herself with the trappings of wealth, but of course none of this is real and therefore Mathilde cannot truly be happy. However, the fact that

Mathilde has a maid already suggests that her discontent is out of proportion with her not-uncomfortable life.

Her husband, on the other hand, seems much more content, declaring over dinner, "Ah! A good stew! I don't know of anything better!" Meanwhile, Mathilde dreams of fashionable dinner parties and "exquisite courses served in wondrous vessels."

Mathilde's unhappiness seems to be a matter of choice since her husband, who lives in the same conditions, is perfectly happy with a good stew. Mathilde focuses on the things she doesn't own rather than the small comforts of life, suggesting that an insatiable appetite for material possessions is a great source of unhappiness.

One day, M. Loisel comes home with an invitation to an elegant party hosted by the Minister of Education. Despite the fact that he "went to endless trouble" getting such a sought-after invitation, Mathilde initially rejects the offer to attend, and is close to tears when she tells him that she doesn't have anything suitable to wear.

M. Loisel cares a great deal about his wife and goes to great lengths to make her happy. Mathilde is unhappy despite her husband's best efforts, once again showing that her unhappiness is greatly exaggerated.

Seeing how unhappy Mathilde is, her husband asks what it would cost to buy her an outfit. Mathilde contemplates for a moment, then asks for 400 francs, which is enough to buy a nice dress but not enough to bring about an immediate refusal from the "thrifty clerk."

By knowingly asking for just the right amount of money, Mathilde seems to be taking advantage of her husband's generosity, revealing some of the negative personality traits that lurk beneath the surface of her outer beauty.

Turning briefly pale, M. Loisel agrees to give Mathilde the money, even though he had been saving 400 francs to buy a new rifle in order to go hunting with his friends on the plains of Nanterre.

M. Loisel sacrifices his own happiness for the sake of his wife's, demonstrating his generosity. Unlike Mathilde, M. Loisel does not find happiness in material possessions but rather in the happiness and the company of others.

On the day of the party, Mathilde's new dress is ready but she is still unhappy. When her husband asks her why, she says that she is embarrassed not to have

a jewel to wear over her gown. M. Loisel suggests that she purchase two or three roses for 10 francs, but Mathilde responds that there's nothing more humiliating than "looking like a pauper in the middle of rich women."

Mathilde always wants more: her desire for material possessions is never satisfied, once again demonstrating that things are not the key to lasting happiness. Mathilde sees expensive objects as a way to look rich, forgetting that she is not as wealthy as she would like to appear.

At her husband's suggestion, Mathilde decides to pay her wealthy friend Mme. Forestier a visit in order to borrow some jewelry. She looks through every item in Mme. Forestier's jewel box, eventually settling on an expensive-looking diamond necklace. For the first time Mathilde is happy as she stands in "ecstasy" staring at her reflection in the mirror.

By picking the most expensive-looking item in Mme. Forestier's jewel box, Mathilde reveals her greed and her superficial understanding of value. By looking at herself in the mirror, Mathilde also reveals her vanity. The flatness of the reflection echoes Mathilde's superficial and illusory appearance of wealth.

At the party, Mathilde is a huge success. She is "lovelier than any other woman" and is noticed by important officials and even the minister himself. Lost in a "cloud of happiness," Mathilde dances "intoxicated, swept away, heady with pleasure."

Mathilde's success at the party hinges on her beauty, seeming to give truth to the notion that beautiful women without means can become the equals of ladies in high society. However, by writing that Mathilde is lost in a "cloud of happiness" and "intoxicated…with pleasure" Maupassant anticipates that this night of happiness will not last, and that there is something not-quite-real about her success.

As they are leaving the party, M. Loisel covers Mathilde with the wraps that he had brought from home, "modest garments of ordinary life, their poverty clashing with the elegance of the ball gown." Embarrassed to be seen by the other women who are draped in "expensive furs," Mathilde runs outside and onto the street.

Once covered by the wraps, Mathilde's appearance of wealth vanishes and she is once again embarrassed to be seen by wealthier women in their "expensive furs," bringing her night of happiness to an end. This sudden shift in mood demonstrates

the power that Mathilde invests in objects, since for her the wraps represent everything that she finds lacking in her life.

Unable to find a carriage, Mathilde and her husband walk towards the Seine, "desperate and shivering." They eventually find a carriage but it is "those old, nocturnal broughams that you see in Paris only at night as if they were ashamed of their squalor by day."

Mathilde and her husband's downcast mood as they search for a carriage further demonstrates that things are back to normal. Like the wraps, for Mathilde the "squalor" of the carriage represents a return to her unsatisfactory reality.

The carriage drops them off at their apartment on the "rue des Martyrs." Mathilde realizes that "it is all over," meaning that her night of happiness and social recognition has come to an end.

By proclaiming that "is it all over," Mathilde recognizes that her happiness at the party—gained only through her beauty and her illusory appearance of wealth—was only temporary. The Loisels' address on the "rue des Martyrs" introduces the theme of martyrdom and foreshadows the suffering that follows.

Stopping to admire herself one last time in the mirror, Mathilde suddenly realizes that the necklace is gone. She and her husband search everywhere for the necklace, but without any luck. Eventually, M. Loisel decides that they must replace the jewelry.

The reappearance of the mirror once again demonstrates Mathilde's vanity and her obsession with appearances. This time, however, the mirror reveals the truth, and as if by magic Mathilde's false appearance of wealth vanishes.

The next day they visit the jeweler whose name was on the necklace's box, but he says that the necklace didn't come from him.

The fact that the box misled the Loisels as to the origin of the necklace is a hint that the necklace might be a fake, and represents the danger of seeking truth in outside appearances.

They then go to another jeweler, where they find a string of diamonds that looks exactly like the necklace they are trying to replace. The necklace costs 40,000 francs.

This price seems right to Mathilde because she primarily liked the necklace for its appearance of being expensive. To her, the value of an object is synonymous with its price.

M. Loisel has 18,000 francs that he inherited from his father but he is forced to borrow the rest of the money to pay for the necklace. He borrows money from his friends and makes ruinous deals with moneylenders and loan sharks. In order to replace the necklace, M. Loisel compromises the rest of his life and is horrified that he has had to risk his signature "without knowing if he'd be able to honor it."

By giving up his inheritance and making risky deals to pay for the necklace, M. Loisel once again demonstrates his generosity. For M. Loisel, replacing the necklace is a question of honor, and his extreme self-sacrifice makes him something of a martyr.

After buying the replacement, Mathilde returns the necklace to her friend. Mme. Forestier doesn't even open the box and so she does not notice the substitution.

The fact that Mme. Forestier does not notice the substitution in another hint that the necklace was a fake, since her attitude suggests that the necklace was never particularly important to Mme. Forestier to begin with.

The following years are difficult for both Mathilde and her husband as they are forced to "experience the horrible life of necessity." After dismissing their maid and renting a garret apartment, M. Loisel takes on a night job balancing accounts and copying documents. Mathilde plays her part "with sudden heroism," learning to do the heavy housework and chores of a working person.

As hinted earlier in the story, the suffering experienced by the Loisels as they struggle to repay their debt is a kind of martyrdom. The complete reversal of fortunes is especially apparent in Mathilde, and her earlier dissatisfaction is thrown into sharp contrast with the true hardship that she now experiences. Her heroism, however, shows that she attributes value to her suffering: for her, one night of wealth is worth ten years of poverty.

After ten long years, the terrible debt is finally repaid. This period of hardship takes its toll on Mathilde, who loses her once-remarkable beauty. She appears like an old woman now, but consoles herself with the memory of the night of the party when she was still beautiful and admired.

The degradation of Mathilde's physical appearance is a warning that beauty always fades and should therefore not be counted on to achieve social success or lasting happiness. Mathilde's daydreams have changed—she no longer dreams of escape into a world of illusory wealth, but rather she reflects on her past life, suggesting that the experience has made Mathilde more grounded in her reality.

One day while taking a walk on the Champs Elysées, Mathilde sees Mme. Forestier, who is still young-looking and beautiful. Mme. Forestier barely recognizes her old friend, remarking how much she has changed.

By contrasting the appearances of Mathilde and Mme. Forestier after ten years, Maupassant reveals that it is in fact beauty that can be bought by wealth and not the other way around, as Mathilde believed. Mme. Forestier's difficulty in recognizing her friend once again demonstrates the deceptiveness of appearances.

Now that the debt has been settled, Mathilde decides to tell Mme. Forestier the whole story, proud that she had been able to replace and pay for such an expensive necklace. However, Mme. Forestier is dismayed to inform her that all this suffering was for nothing, exclaiming: "You say you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine? [...] My necklace was paste. It was worth at most 500 francs!"

Mathilde's pride shows that she has been able to find meaning in her suffering based on the expensiveness of the necklace. However, by revealing that the necklace was a fake, Mme. Forestier makes those sacrifices meaningless. The twist ending also exposes the deceptiveness of appearances and the dangers of attributing too much power to material possessions, since their value may be illusory.

Themes

Reality and Illusion

In “The Necklace,” Guy de Maupassant demonstrates that appearances—especially the appearance of wealth—are often at odds with reality. Attempting to appear richer than she truly is, Mathilde Loisel borrows a diamond necklace from her friend Jeanne Forestier and then loses it at a ball. She and her husband buy an expensive replacement on credit, return the replacement to the friend as though it’s the original, and then live ten years in poverty to repay their debts. In the end, however, Mathilde learns that the original necklace was only costume jewelry—the appearance of wealth she briefly achieved at the ball was based on false diamonds and she has suffered uselessly to replace those fake diamonds with real ones, since neither she nor the necklace’s owner noticed the difference. This uncontrollable slippage between reality and illusion, and the catastrophe it invites, shows that losing sight of reality in order to cultivate a false appearance can easily lead to ruin.

From the beginning of the story, Mathilde feels that her appearance does not match her reality, as she is a beautiful woman with refined taste born to a class that she feels is beneath her. Since she feels that she naturally belongs to a different class, Mathilde is constantly distressed “the poverty of her apartment, the dinginess of the walls, the shabbiness of the chairs, the ugliness of the fabrics.” Instead of acknowledging and appreciating her reality, she lives in a world of daydreams, imagining “hushed antechambers with Oriental hangings,” “fine furniture carrying priceless knicknacks,” and eating “the rosy flesh of a trout or the wings of a grouse.” Therefore, Mathilde believes that her reality should match her appearance, which leads her to believe that she deserves a different life, one which she can only live in dreams.

When the Loisels receive an invitation to an elegant party hosted by the Minister of Education, Mathilde buys an expensive gown and borrows a diamond necklace from Mme. Forestier so that she does not look "like a pauper in the middle of rich women." Maupassant suggests, however, that the elegant, wealthy appearance the necklace gives Mathilde is dangerous and illusory. He describes Mathilde in Mme. Forestier's dressing room as "ecstatic in front of her reflection" in the mirror, which evokes Narcissus getting so lost in his own reflection that he died. Furthermore, at the ball, Mathilde is filled with pleasure that seems dangerous and not quite real. Maupassant writes, "She danced, intoxicated, swept away, heady with pleasure, thinking of nothing, in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her conquest, in something like a cloud of happiness made of all that homage." In other words, Mathilde seems drunk on the admiration of others, forgetting that their admiration is based, in part, on an appearance of wealth that is at odds with her reality.

In keeping with her unwillingness to acknowledge reality, Mathilde does not tell the truth when she realizes that she has lost her friend's necklace. Instead, she and her husband ruin themselves financially to buy an expensive replacement. In addition, Mathilde seems so invested in the notion that appearances should match reality that she cannot recognize the hints that the necklace isn't valuable. First, the Loisels visit the jeweler whose name was on the necklace's box, but he says that the necklace didn't come from him. The box, therefore, misled them as to the origin of the necklace—a potent metaphor for Mathilde herself, and a hint that the necklace might be fake. Furthermore, when Mathilde brings the expensive new necklace to "return" to her friend, Mme. Forestier doesn't even open the box and she never notices that the necklace is different. This suggests that the necklace was never particularly important to Mme. Forestier to begin with, which would likely not be true for a necklace worth 40,000 francs.

Through Mathilde and her husband's suffering in the decade it takes them to pay their debts, Maupassant seems to be making a straightforward moral argument about the price of greed, but the twist ending—when Mathilde

admits to Mme. Forestier that her family has been ruined by replacing the diamond necklace, and Mme. Forestier reveals that the original necklace was fake—complicates the story's morality. The fact that Mme. Forestier's necklace was made of paste shows that the appearance of wealth relies on illusion, even for the rich. Perhaps, then, the wealth Mathilde believed she was owed is inaccessible not simply to her but also to everyone else, including the truly wealthy. Furthermore, the fact that the necklace was a fake makes the Loisels' sacrifice worthless—they have bought in to the myth that appearances correspond to reality, and this leads them to lose even the meager ease and status they once had. Maupassant's treatment of the disjunction between appearance and reality therefore seems to be more than a straightforward attempt to caution people against greed and entitlement—first and foremost, it's a warning about the catastrophes that can occur when a person attempts to make reality live up to their illusion.

Women and Beauty

At the beginning of "The Necklace," Guy de Maupassant writes that for women, "their beauty, their grace, and their charm serve them in lieu of birth and family background" and that "Their native finesse, their instinct for elegance, their versatile minds are their sole hierarchy, making shop girls the equals of the grandest ladies." His implication is that a woman's beauty and poise can offer her upward social mobility. While Maupassant presents this as being the conventional wisdom—and an idea that Mathilde buys into—the remainder of his story demonstrates that beauty does not necessarily have the power to change a woman's class. Furthermore, the story suggests that believing that beauty has more power than it does can corrupt women and leave them vulnerable once their beauty is gone.

Mathilde is an exceptionally beautiful woman from humble origins, but her beauty makes her feel that she "was meant for all delicacies and all luxuries." Despite this belief, Maupassant suggests that any entrance into high society that her beauty affords her is temporary. After the party, for example,

Mathilde's husband covers her with "the modest garments of ordinary life, their poverty clashing with the elegance of the ball gown," ruining her fashionable appearance and bringing the magical night to a sudden end. Although Mathilde's beauty is the key to her success at the party, her beauty is not enough to make this brief interlude to become her permanent reality. Furthermore, her sense of entitlement to wealth, which is founded on her beauty, makes her greedy and leads her to poor decision making, such as borrowing the necklace from Mme. Forestier, ultimately leading to her ruin. Beauty, in this case, does not guarantee upward mobility, but rather leads the Loisels into poverty.

Not only does beauty lack the power to propel Mathilde into a higher class, but Maupassant shows that beauty also can destroy a person's character. Mathilde's behavior throughout the story is vain and selfish, since her beauty gives her such a high opinion of herself. Outer beauty, then, can conceal and even create an unattractive personality. Mathilde's selfishness is clearest when she spends the money her husband has saved to buy a rife for himself in order to have an expensive dress for a single night of upper-class celebration. Her vanity is apparent throughout the story, but it is especially noticeable when she looks at herself in the mirror, before and after the party, to obsess over her own beauty.

In one sense, since Mathilde's vanity and selfishness lead her to borrow the necklace that she ultimately loses, her ruin can in part be seen as a morality tale asserting the importance of inner rather than outer beauty. Fittingly, then, by the end of the story Mathilde's outward appearance comes to match her inner ugliness. Maupassant writes: "Madame Loisel looked old now. She had become the strong, and hard, and crude woman of poor households." Mathilde's poverty is experienced as a loss of her physical beauty, suggesting that the advancement of beautiful women will always be short-lived. On the other hand, though, Maupassant points out that Mme. Forrestier (unlike Mathilde) still looks young and beautiful. By contrasting the different fates of these two women Maupassant suggests that beauty is bought by status and not

the other way around, revealing the false promise of advancement created by Mathilde's remarkable appearance.

Although Mathilde was once admired for her physical beauty, briefly giving her access to high society, by the end of the story her beauty is gone. Mathilde's greatest mistake was to attach too much important to her physical appearance, and her ruin can be read as a correction to her vanity and selfishness, as well as a tragic end to the false sense of expectation that beauty can create.

Ambition, Greed, and Material Possessions

"The Necklace" is, at its heart, a story about Mathilde's social ambition, which takes the form of a desire to acquire luxurious objects that she cannot afford. Through her ruin, Maupassant warns against the dangers of greed and criticizes those who ascribe too much value to wealth and material possessions.

Mathilde invests objects like the diamond necklace she borrows from Mme. Forestier with enormous significance, and her happiness is heavily dependent on her possession of the objects she desires. Mathilde's distress at the beginning of the story is largely a result of her unfulfilled desire for material objects: "She had no wardrobe, no jewels, nothing." This materialism is inextricable from her social ambition, as she fears that she will be rejected by the higher classes because she does not appear to be wealthy enough. Once Mathilde obtains the diamond necklace she wants and is able to wear it at the party, she quickly becomes "wild with joy." However, as soon as the party is over Mathilde loses the necklace and is once again unhappy, suggesting that material possessions cannot guarantee long-lasting happiness, and that greed, in fact, can lead to ruin.

Mathilde's desire for material possessions is doubly misguided because she has no concept of value beyond how much an object is worth. Throughout the

story Maupassant assigns many objects a specific cash value, suggesting that an object's value is synonymous with its price. However, Maupassant undermines the adequacy of the conflation of price with value when the Loisels have to choose whether to spend 400 francs on Mathilde's evening dress or on the rifle for which her husband had long been saving. Despite the fact that these two objects have an equal cash value, the choice of how to spend the money reflects the spender's moral and social values. The dress is a somewhat frivolous purchase that corresponds to Mathilde's vanity and social ambition. Her "frugal" husband, on the other hand, asks that she buy a "suitable gown" that could be worn to other affairs. Meanwhile, the rifle (which would enable him to have a hobby that he shares with friends) seems like a much more reasonable, thought out, and class-appropriate purchase than Mathilde's dress—one that will have a lasting value rather than a temporary, superficial value.

Moreover, Maupassant demonstrates that monetary value is somewhat arbitrary since even fashionable things can be had cheaply. Mathilde's husband suggests that she wear roses costing 10 francs to the ball since "they're very chic this season," but Mathilde won't hear of having ornaments that aren't visibly expensive. Furthermore, Mathilde seems only to love Mme. Forestier's necklace because she believes it is expensive, though the necklace is actually made of paste and not worth much at all. Mathilde's inability to separate price from value, then, is what leads her to her ruin.

Taken together, Mathilde's obsession with money and material possessions demonstrates the dangers of greed. Instead of enjoying the small comforts of life like her husband does—a servant to do the housework, the pleasure of warm soup—Mathilde is fixated on what she doesn't have. She always wants more, and the objects she desires are far beyond her financial means. Mathilde's greed drives her to pick the most expensive-looking necklace out of Mme. Forestier's jewel box, and the huge debt she and her husband take on to replace the lost necklace can be seen as a natural consequence of her greediness.

While Maupassant certainly judges Mathilde for her greed and social ambition, he also mitigates the blame by showing that she is playing into the cultural norms of her time: in late-nineteenth century France, wealth was synonymous with social status, and both depended on the ownership of material goods. Maupassant is critical not simply of Mathilde, but also of the value system in which she lives. “The Necklace” therefore demonstrates how harmful materialistic social hierarchies can be to those who cannot afford to access the upper classes.

Sacrifice, Suffering, and Martyrdom

In the final section of “The Necklace,” Mathilde and her husband suffer for a decade as they struggle to pay back their enormous debt from the loss of the necklace. This suffering, combined with the fact that the Loisels live on “rue des Martyrs,” suggests that Maupassant wants readers to see Mathilde and her husband both as martyrs, albeit martyrs of different sorts.

Mathilde is a martyr for a cause: her desire for symbols of wealth stems from her belief that anything that appears expensive must be truly worthwhile. Therefore, Mathilde thinks of her suffering less as penance (or as a moral punishment for her greed) than as a transaction, in which she was wealthy for a night and now must pay the price. In other words, Mathilde justifies her suffering and bears it remarkably well through her unwavering belief that the necklace was worth ten years of poverty.

Although Mathilde seems to view her suffering as transactional rather than moral, readers can see that the ways in which she suffers seem to be in direct response to her prior vanities and greed. Mathilde felt poor and found her clothes, her apartment, and her life inadequate. Now she is forced to experience “the horrible life of necessity,” showing her what true poverty is like. In the first part of the story, Mathilde is embarrassed by the Breton servant who does her housework. Now she is forced to do the housework herself and live the life of working people. The first part of the story is driven

by Mathilde's ambition to be accepted into high society. She goes to the party dressed in fashionable clothes and is admired by cabinet officials and ministers. Now, however, she is "dressed like a pauper" and goes to the market to bargain with fruit dealers, grocers, and butchers who insult her. In other words, the life she experiences for ten years is the exact opposite of the life she desired at the beginning of the story, suggesting that her suffering is a penance for her earlier ambitions.

However, it does not seem that Mathilde has learned the lesson from her reversal of fortune, undermining the idea that suffering can serve as a meaningful punishment for Mathilde's moral failings. Mathilde's exchange with Mme. Forestier shows that she does not accept responsibility for either borrowing or losing the necklace: "I've had a hard life since I last saw you. And lots of misery.... And all because of you!" At best, Mathilde views losing the necklace and her ensuing misfortune as a moment of bad luck. At worst, she blames it on the woman who was generous enough to lend her the necklace rather than herself, the one who lost it. In addition, Mathilde's belief that the value of the necklace justifies her suffering proves hollow when Mme. Forestier reveals that the necklace is a fake. Since Mathilde finds transactional, rather than moral, value in her suffering, the fact that the necklace is cheap makes that suffering meaningless, which is perhaps her true punishment.

By contrast, Mathilde's husband experiences a different kind of suffering, and his martyrdom revolves around the questions of honor, generosity, and self-sacrifice. Mathilde's husband is characterized by his generosity throughout the story, and at times it seems as if he is being taken advantage of by his more selfish wife. For example, Mathilde knows to ask him for just the right amount of money, enough to afford an expensive dress but not so much as to elicit "immediate refusal and terrified exclamation from the frugal clerk." The fact that M. Loisel prioritizes his wife's frivolous desires over his own happiness leads to greater and greater sacrifices, until he must risk everything to borrow the money they need to replace the necklace. For M. Loisel, replacing the necklace is a question of honor and he is terrified by the thought of risking his signature without knowing if he can fulfill his obligations. Mathilde's husband is a martyr because it is his positive qualities—especially his kindness and his

generosity—that lead to his downfall. Maupassant suggests that generosity can be catastrophic if dispensed indiscriminately.

Despite their suffering, Mathilde and her husband accept their fate and heroically live a life of privation to pay back their debt. Both become martyrs, although Mathilde's martyrdom is undermined because she views her suffering as a worthwhile price to pay for the necklace, when in fact it was all for nothing. Her husband emerges as the true martyr, for his commitments to love and honor have led him to sacrifice his life to pay for a mistake that was not even his own.

Happiness

In "The Necklace," Guy de Maupassant demonstrates the importance of knowing how to achieve happiness in a meaningful and lasting way. At the beginning of the story, Mathilde and her husband live a modest life, but with enough money to live comfortably. However, Mathilde is perpetually discontented, unable to be happy without the clothes and jewels of a wealthy woman. Although Mathilde achieves a fleeting moment of happiness during the party, the next ten years of her life are filled with true suffering, in sharp contrast with her earlier self-pity which seemed out of sync with the comfortable life she lived. By experiencing true poverty, Mathilde gains a new perspective on life and learns to be satisfied with what she has.

Mathilde's initial unhappiness seems like a choice: she lives a perfectly pleasant life and could easily be contented with it, but instead of focusing on the good things she has, Mathilde obsesses over what she doesn't have, driving her to discontent. Maupassant points out that the things that make Mathilde so unhappy "wouldn't have even been noticed by any other woman of her station," which suggests that Mathilde's temperament is not a result of privation, but rather it is a character flaw. Furthermore, unlike Mathilde, her husband is able to be happy with their lot: he says, "Ah! A good stew! I don't know of anything better." This demonstrates that happiness is, at least in part, a matter of perception or of choice.

Even when Mathilde experiences a rare moment of happiness at the party, Maupassant depicts this happiness as fleeting: the party only lasts a night, and her happiness is entirely dependent on her possession of the dress and the necklace. During the party Mathilde is in a “cloud of happiness,” giving the scene a dreamlike quality, almost as if it were too good to be true. However, once the necklace is gone her happiness vanishes. As soon as the Loisels leave the party, they are “desperate and shivering,” and at the end of the night, Mathilde remarks “it is over.”

After Mathilde has been forced to spend ten years suffering to pay off the debt she incurred after losing the necklace, she seems paradoxically more content. The fact that Mathilde is able to play her part “with sudden heroism” shows that she is no longer prey to the self-pity and dissatisfaction that characterized her in the first part of the story. She also develops a new sense of perspective with regard to happiness and suffering. At the end of the story, she remarks: “What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? Who can say? How little there is between happiness and misery!” The idea that things could have turned out differently shows that Mathilde has learned that happiness is not simply a matter of owning more money or more things, and the fact that her idle thoughts are contemplations of happiness and misery rather than the self-pitying daydreams of wealth she had before shows that she has become more grounded through her experience of suffering.

Mathilde’s new ideas on life and on happiness illustrate the idea that it is better to accept one’s lot in life than to fight against it. Moreover, by experiencing a truly difficult existence, Mathilde develops a new perspective on the privileges and small comforts of her earlier life. Although Mathilde is not happy in her new life, she is more grounded in reality and she is newly willing to accept things for the way they are.

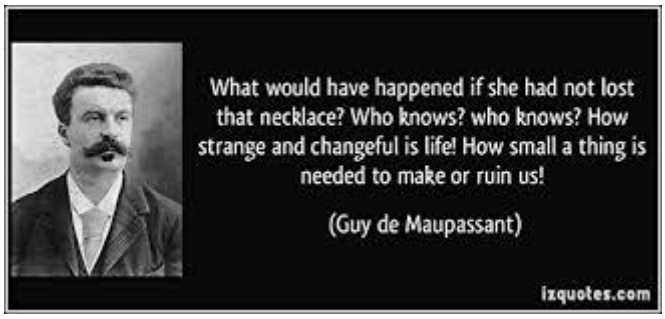
Symbols

The Necklace

The necklace that Mathilde borrows from Jeanne Forestier represents the idea that appearances can be deceiving. The necklace looks like it is made of expensive diamonds, but it is in fact made of paste, costing at most 500 francs. The fact that Mathilde is unable to tell the difference between the two reveals her inability look beneath the surface to see the true value of things. From Mathilde's perspective, the necklace is the physical embodiment of the class and social status she so desires, and the fact that she picks the most expensive-looking (but not necessarily the most valuable) item from Mme. Forestier's jewel box points to her unrestrained greed and ambition. Likewise, the revelation that the necklace is a fake demonstrates that Mathilde's ambition is woefully misguided in the sense that she puts too much stock in physical objects and their power to change her life. The necklace is also thematically linked to the dangers of female beauty, especially with regard to the ugliness that an attractive outward appearance can conceal.

The Mirror

The mirror symbolizes Mathilde's vanity and the importance she attaches to outward appearances. One of the few moments in the story in which Mathilde is truly happy is when she is standing in front of a mirror to admire herself wearing the necklace: "She placed it on her throat, against her high-necked dress, and remained ecstatic in front of her reflection." Mathilde's ecstasy upon seeing herself in the mirror recalls the story of Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflection and stared at it until he died. The mirror thus serves as a warning against vanity while also demonstrating that physical appearances are flat and without substance, like a reflection. In addition, the mirror reminds the reader that Mathilde's appearance of wealth and status is an illusion: the next time Mathilde looks in a mirror the necklace is gone, as if by magic.


What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? who knows? How strange and changeful is life! How small a thing is needed to make or ruin us!
(Guy de Maupassant)
izquotes.com

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