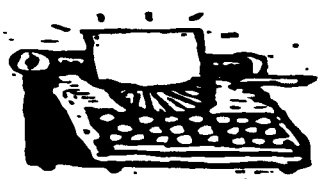
The Necklace

Guy de Maupassant

1884

Guy de Maupassant's short story "The Necklace" ("La parure") was first published in the Paris newspaper *Le Gaulois* on February 17, 1884, and was subsequently included in his 1885 collection of short stories *Tales of Day and Night* (*Contes de jour et de la nuit*). Like most of Maupassant's short fiction, it was an instant success, and it has become his most widely read and anthologized story. In addition to its well-rounded characters, tight plotting, wealth of detail, and keen social commentary, "The Necklace" is conspicuous for its use of the "whip-crack" or "O. Henry" ending, in which a plot twist at the end of the story completely changes the story's meaning. Although Maupassant rarely made use of the device, its presence in this work has tied him to it irrevocably. Although it is not known where Maupassant got the idea for his story, certain connections may be made between "The Necklace" and the novel *Madame Bovary,* written by Maupassant's mentor and friend, Gustave Flaubert. Both stories feature a young, beautiful woman in a social situation that she finds distasteful. Like Madame Bovary, Mathilde Loisel attempts to escape her social station in life, but her scheming actions ultimately doom her.



Author Biography

Henri-Rene-Albert Guy de Maupassant was born on August 5, 1850, near Tourville-sur-Arques in

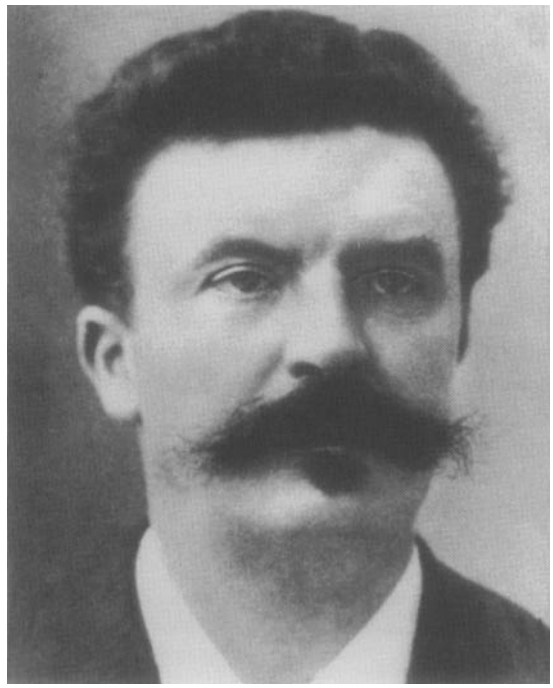
Normandy, France, where he spent most of his early life. The oldest child of wealthy parents who eventually separated, Maupassant was not allowed to attend school until he was thirteen years old. Before then, the local parish priest acted as his tutor.

After being expelled from a Catholic seminary school, Maupassant finished his schooling at a Rouen boarding school before studying law at the University of Paris. His studies were soon interrupted by the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, and Maupassant became a soldier in Normandy. After the war, Maupassant did not return to the university and instead entered the civil service, working as a clerk in the Naval and Education Ministries.

Resigning from the Ministry of Education in 1880, Maupassant became a full-time writer. He began by imitating the style of Gustave Flaubert, a prominent French novelist who had been a close friend of Maupassant's mother for decades. Unsubstantiated rumors circulated at the time that Flaubert was Maupassant's true father; both parties always vehemently denied the allegations. Taken under Flaubert's wing, Maupassant became acquainted with some of the most prominent authors of his time, including Emile Zola, Ivan Turgenev, and Alphonse Daudet.

Following the publication of his first story, "Boule de suif" ("ball of fat" or "ball of suet"), in an 1880 collection of stories by several authors, Maupassant established himself as a prominent writer of both short stories and novels. During the next decade, he published six novels and nearly three hundred short stories, many of them in the Paris newspapers *Gil-Blas* and *Le Gaulois.* He also wrote plays, poetry, travel essays, and newspaper articles. "The Necklace" ("La parure") appeared in *Le Gaulois* on February 17, 1884, and was included in Maupassant's 1885 collection *Stories of Night and Day* (*Contes du jour et de la nuit*).

During the 1880s, Maupassant's health declined, largely as a result of syphilis, which he had contracted in the 1870s but which physicians had not diagnosed. Following an unsuccessful suicide attempt on January 2, 1892, Maupassant was placed in a sanitarium. He died a year and a half later of complications from the disease.



Guy de Maupassant

Plot Summary

"The Necklace" begins with a description of Madame Mathilde Loisel. Though she is "pretty and charming," she and her husband, a clerk in the Ministry of Education, are not well off financially. She has always dreamed of a life of leisure, with attentive servants and a large home, but her lifestyle is decidedly more modest. Ashamed of her social standing, she no longer visits Madame Forestier, an old school friend who has become rich.

When the Loisels are invited to a ball, Madame Loisel becomes very upset, insisting that she has nothing appropriate to wear to such an event. Hoping to make his wife feel better, Monsieur Loisel offers to buy her a new dress. As the ball approaches, Madame Loisel again becomes anxious because she has no jewels to wear. Her husband suggests she borrow jewels from Madame Forestier. Madame Loisel pays her old friend a visit the next day. She is welcomed and encouraged to borrow any piece of jewelry that she desires. She selects a beautiful diamond necklace.

At the ball, Madame Loisel enjoys herself immensely and many men notice her. She dances until 4:00 in the morning, and then she and her husband return home in a decrepit cab. Not until they are back in their humble house does Madame Loisel realize that she has lost the diamond necklace. Her husband spends several hours retracing their steps but finds nothing. They decide to replace

the necklace without telling Madame Forestier, and they go heavily in debt.

Years of toil and grueling work in an effort to repay their debt ages Madame Loisel so she looks quite older than her years. After ten long years of poverty, however, they finally pay off their entire debt. Still, Madame Loisel wistfully and fondly remembers the evening of the ball. One day shortly thereafter, Madame Loisel runs into Madame Forestier, who still looks young and beautiful. Madame Loisel tells her friend the whole story. Madame Forestier, who had not realized that her necklace had been replaced with another, reveals that the original, made of imitation diamonds, was not valuable.

Characters

Madame Jeanne Forestier

Madame Forestier is a school friend of Mathilde Loisel, and she lends her the necklace that Madame Loisel wears to the ball. Madame Forestier's wealth has intimidated Madame Loisel, preventing her from keeping in touch with her old friend. When Madame Loisel does visit, Madame Forestier is as friendly as ever, generously offering to lend her friend a piece of her jewelry for the ball. When the diamond necklace is returned more than a week late, however, Madame Forestier is cold and reproachful. She does not know that the borrowed necklace was lost and that the Loisels have pledged themselves to years of debt to buy a costly replacement. Years later, the two meet on the street. Madame Loisel has aged prematurely by toil and hardship, while Madame Forestier is "still young, still beautiful, still attractive." She does not recognize her old friend when they meet and is "deeply moved" when she learns that the Loisels had spent the last decade in debt to replace her necklace.

Madame Mathilde Loisel

It is Madame Loisel's desire to be part of the upper class which sets the story's events in motion. She is a beautiful woman who feels herself "born for every delicacy and luxury." Her belief that she is meant for better things than middle-class drudgery forms the core of her personality. She believes that superficial things—a ball gown, better furniture, a large house—will make her happy, and an invitation to a ball makes her miserable because it reminds her of her dowdy wardrobe and lack of jewels. After securing these trappings of luxury, she has the time of her life at the ball, for one evening living the lifestyle she believes herself entitled to. After losing a borrowed necklace, she is not able to admit the error to the friend who lent it. While spending many years in poverty, toiling to repay the debt of replacing the necklace, Madame Loisel prematurely loses her physical beauty.

Monsieur Loisel

Monsieur Loisel's complacency and contentment with his social situation contrasts markedly with his wife's desire to experience life among the social elite. Whereas Madame Loisel dreams of magnificent multi-course meals, her husband is satisfied with simple fare: "Scotch broth! What could be better?" He is attentive to his wife's desires, however, procuring tickets to a ball so that she can see "all the really big people." He gives his wife the four hundred francs that he had set aside for a gun so that she can buy a dress, and spends several early morning hours searching the streets for the lost necklace even though he must go to work that day. Seeking to protect his wife's honor, he suggests that they tell Madame Forestier that the necklace is being fixed rather than that it has been lost.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

In his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," John Keats pronounced that "beauty is truth, truth beauty." While subsequent generations have appreciated this Romantic assertion, Maupassant's story aptly demonstrates that it is not always correct. Madame Loisel is beautiful, but she is not content. She has the appearance of beauty but not the reality (or truth) of beauty. She is pretty and charming, but she is also unhappy with her lot in life and believes that she deserves more. Living modestly with her husband before the ball, Madame Loisel believes she is suffering a terrible injustice by having few luxuries. In fact, she does not experience the reality of poverty until she and her husband go into debt to pay off the necklace. The necklace itself represents the theme of appearances versus reality. While sufficiently beautiful to make Madame Loisel feel comfortable during the ministerial ball, the necklace is actually nothing more than paste and gilt. Thus, it is not the reality of wealth or high social

class that is important for Madame Loisel, just the appearance of it.

Class Conflict

The theme of class conflict is closely tied to that of appearance and reality. The Loisels are members of the lower bourgeoisie, a class that stands above tradesmen and laborers (and above Madame Loisel's artisan family) but significantly below the class that has a hand in running things. Madame Loisel's dreams of "delicacy and luxury" are beyond her social reach. She has only one opportunity to attend a ball, but for the dignitaries and under-secretaries of state she meets there, such occasions are commonplace. She desperately wants to be part of this world, and remembers the affair fondly for many years. Her childhood friend, the upper-class Madame Forestier, is the target of Madame Loisel's envy before the ball, and the target of her blame afterwards as she descends into poverty to repay the necklace. Madame Loisel's focus on social climbing is unbecoming and in opposition to her outward beauty. Her belief that beautiful things and luxury are essential to her happiness is the fallacy that mars her physical beauty. Monsieur Loisel does not suffer the same obsession with class conflict as his wife does. He realizes that his wife would like to go to a ball, and he thinks that presenting the invitation to her will make her happy. He is surprised to learn that she will only be happy if she can give the illusion at the ball that she belongs to the upper class.

Generosity and Greed

Although she does not have a lot of money, Madame Loisel may be justly characterized as greedy. Her life is comfortable enough to afford one servant, but she wishes for several. She has plenty of food, but she dreams of "delicate meals." Her husband can barely afford to buy her a ball gown, but she insists on having jewelry to go with it. When she first sees her friend's diamond necklace, "her heart [beats] covetously." Her greed stands in marked contrast to the generosity of her husband and Madame Forestier. Monsieur Loisel forgoes both the purchase of a gun and plans for a shooting holiday with friends so that his wife can have an appropriate dress. Later, when his wife discovers that she has lost the necklace, he voluntarily spends several late hours scouring the streets for it even though he must go to work that morning. Similarly, Madame Forestier does not hesitate to offer her old friend the use of any of her jewelry, answering Madame Loisel's entreaty to let her wear the necklace with a simple "Yes, of course." Although the necklace is made of imitation diamonds, it is still worth five hundred francs—more than Madame Loisel's gown.



Media Adaptations

- There are at least three film versions of Maupassant's story available in English. The first, a silent film from 1909, was directed by D. W. Griffith and runs eleven minutes. A 1980 version runs twenty minutes and is distributed by Britannica Films. A 1981 production runs twenty-two minutes and is distributed by Barr Entertainment.
- Another film version of "The Necklace," which followed the French title of "La parure," appeared on American television on January 21, 1949. The famous conclusion was changed to a happy ending, which was apparently more to the producing advertiser's liking.
- In addition, there are several audio recordings of "The Necklace," most available on both cassette and compact disc: *Maupassant's Best-Known Stories* (two volumes), distributed by Cassette Works; *De Maupassant Short Stories* (one volume), distributed by Listening Library; *Favorite Stories of Guy de Maupassant* (two volumes), distributed by Jimcin Recordings; and the French-language *"La parure," "Deux amix," "Le bapte"* (one volume, abridged), distributed by Olivia & Hall.

Style

Narration and Point of View

Like most of Maupassant's short stories, "The Necklace" is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, who refrains from judging the characters or their actions. The narrator does have access to the

Topics for Further Study



- Research the development of France's Third Republic and examine how the society depicted in this story reflects the aspirations and apprehensions of the French nation in the 1880s.
- Explore the literary circles of which Maupassant was a part and explain how their theories about the role of literature in society affected the development of French, European, and Western fiction.
- Read several versions of the Cinderella fable and compare them with this story.
- Compare this and other translations of the story with the French original and account for differences between the English versions.

characters' thoughts, and mentions that Madame Loisel is unhappy because she feels that she married beneath her. But for the most part, the narrator simply describes the events of the story, leaving it up to the reader to determine the nature of the characters through their actions. Most of all, the narrator is concerned with Madame Loisel. Though most of the story concerns the events surrounding the ball, the narrator recounts her birth into a humble family, her marriage, and also the many years of poverty they suffer afterward as a result of losing the necklace. This deft narration allows Maupassant to tell a story that stretches many years in the space of only a few pages.

Symbolism

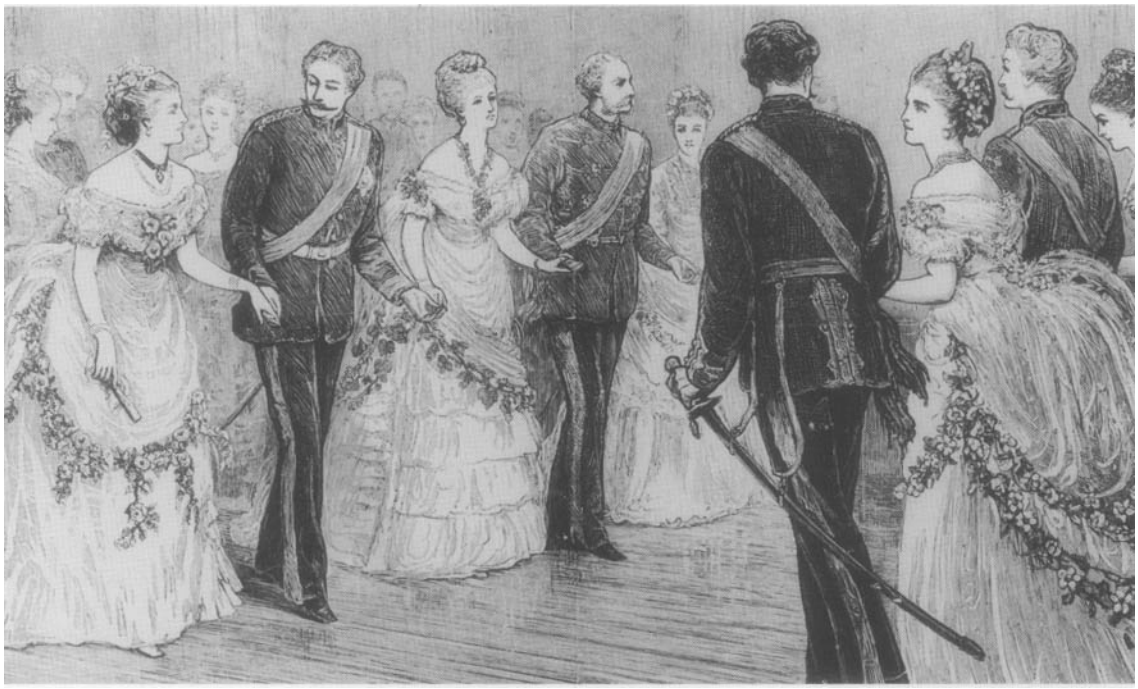
The necklace is the central symbol of the story. Madame Loisel "had no clothes, no jewels, nothing," and while her husband can buy her a dress, they cannot afford jewelry. The necklace thus represents Madame Loisel's greed and also her artificiality. She judges herself by the things that she has, and believes others will too. The necklace of artificial diamonds symbolizes the insincerity of her character. Those who admire the necklace only for its supposed worth have been fooled. Just because it looks real does not mean that it is real. This symbolism can be extended to Madame Loisel: Just because she looks like an upper-class lady in her ball gown and jewels does not mean that she is one. The men at the ball who admire her and succumb to her charms and wits can also be said to value appearance over reality, since they have been beguiled by a woman whose charms have been brought out by such artificial means.

Fable

Many critics have read "The Necklace" as a Cinderella tale in reverse. Like Cinderella, Madame Loisel lives a humble life of drudgery (or so she believes) and cannot attend the ball until a fairy godmother figure—Madame Forestier—provides her with a dazzling necklace that will make her one of the most beautiful women at the dance. As Madame Loisel leaves the ball, the illusion of her refinement begins to crumble. Just as Cinderella's gown turns into a servant's frock, so must Madame Loisel put on "modest everyday clothes" to protect herself from the cold of the night air. Ashamed, she "rapidly descend[s] the staircase," likely losing the necklace then—just as Cinderella loses her glass shoe as she hurries to beat the stroke of midnight. The wagon that takes the Loisels home is old and shabby, more like a pumpkin than a grand carriage. Whereas Cinderella eventually wins her prince and thus gains admission to elite society, Madame Loisel's fortunes progress in the opposite direction from "happily ever after." In Cinderella, truth and beauty go hand-in-hand, but in "The Necklace," Madame Loisel is not truthful to Madame Forestier about the fate of the necklace, and she loses her beauty during the years of hard labor she suffers as a result of her insincerity and greed.

Irony

Concerned with the disparity between appearance and reality, "The Necklace" deals with issues arising from ironic situations. In a society that so highly values appearance, it is ironic that the beautiful Madame Loisel is excluded from society because of her class standing. The story's greatest irony, however, is embodied in the necklace itself; while it appears to be a piece of jewelry of great value, it is really an imitation. The Loisels sacrifice their humble but sufficient home to buy an expensive replacement for a cheap original. The reader may also discover irony in the main character's name. "Madame Loisel" sounds much like "mademoiselle," the French term for a young, unmarried girl, which is what Mathilde wishes she could be.



Couples dancing a quadrille at a nineteenth-century ball.

Hamartia

In tragic stories, *hamartia* is an error in action or judgment that causes the protagonist to experience a reversal of fortune. In "The Necklace," this is not when Madame Loisel borrows her friend's jewelry, but when she fails to tell Madame Forestier the truth about what has happened to it. Because she does not tell the truth, Madame Loisel does not learn that the necklace is a fake. She and her husband are forced into lives of poverty as a direct result of their dishonesty.

Historical Context

The Third Republic

Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the expulsion of Napoleon III as emperor, the remains of the French government reestablished itself as a republic. Peace with the Germans had been dearly bought; the French paid a five billion franc indemnity and surrendered valuable land along the eastern frontier. While the Prussian victory helped establish the modern German state, France was demoted to a somewhat secondary role in European affairs. Civil war erupted in Paris between Republicans and Monarchists, threatening to tear apart the French state, but a peaceful settlement was eventually reached. By 1879, with the resignation of its Monarchist president, the Third Republic had become the firmly established government, and the French began to look beyond their domestic troubles. During the 1880s, France reinstated itself as a primary force in the geopolitical arena, establishing protectorates in China and Southeast Asia and reasserting its control over areas of Africa. The mood of the French following their defeat by the Prussians in 1871 was somber, but a decade later the nation was buoyant, even though certain factional conflicts still remained.

The Ministry of Education

While most English-language translations of "The Necklace" declare that Monsieur Loisel is a civil servant under the Minister of Education, technically this is not true. The French term is actually "ministre de l'Instruction publique," or Minister of Public Instruction. During the early 1880s, there was considerable debate over the relationship between religion and education. Predominantly Catholic France had relied upon parochial education, particularly at the primary school level, for generations. As the Republicans gained power, however, laws governing the separation of church and state were more actively enforced. Unauthorized congre-

Compare & Contrast

- **1880s:** During the 1880s, as a republican government solidified following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, France entered into a period of expansionism. In part, their imperialistic attitude was fueled by a desire to restore the national pride that was wounded in the war. During this time, a distorted view of social Darwinism took hold of many Europeans, infusing them with the belief that they were naturally superior to "lesser" races and should therefore rule over them.

  1998: French President Jacques Chirac and his Prime Minister Alain Juppe are concerned with reducing government spending and lowering taxes. In 1995, Chirac won the presidential election in part because of his promise to address the disparity between the rich and the poor in his country, but within two years growing labor unrest attests to the public's dissatisfaction with his policies.

- **1880s:** Loisel attempts to pay for the lost necklace in a variety of ways. He borrows money from usurers and incurs enormous debts in the process. Usury is the practice of charging more than the legal rate of interest for lending money. Since the sixteenth century, the practice of usury has been the subject of ethical debate, but it is a common practice in Europe.

  1990s: Borrowers are protected against usurious rates in the United States by various state and federal laws. Nevertheless, credit card debt reaches record highs as many consumers buy on credit and pay high interest rates for the privilege. High credit card balances keep millions in debt for years.

gations such as the Jesuits were forbidden to offer instruction, creating considerable discord. Free, nonreligious elementary schooling was established by law and became obligatory in 1881. It is worth noting that, like Monsieur Loisel, Maupassant was a clerk in the Ministry of Education from 1878 to 1880.

Literary Movements

During the second half of the nineteenth century, French fiction was dominated by two literary movements: realism and naturalism. Prior to 1850, French novels—including those written by such famous authors as Victor Hugo, Honore de Balzac, and Alexandre Dumas—had been highly imaginative and romantic, filled with admirable protagonists, dire conflicts, and exciting scenes. Following the uprising of 1848, however, a new generation of French writers led by Gustave Flaubert actively promoted a different approach to fiction that emphasized the realistic depiction of the human condition rather than romanticized tales of heroes and villains. These realists were soon joined by the naturalists, a group of writers, of whom Emile Zola was the most prominent, who portrayed civilization as a thin veneer that barely separated human beings from their natural (and sometimes animal) instincts. In was within this literary environment that Maupassant began his writing career. Many of his stories, including "The Necklace," demonstrate his affinity to both the realist and naturalist movements. Following the realist tenet, his characters are not types but individuals whose motives are understandable if not always agreeable. In the naturalist vein, Maupassant's stories are often attentive to the failings of society, demonstrating that humankind's inherent instincts do not always conform to social values.

Critical Overview

By the time "The Necklace" was first published, Maupassant had already established his reputation as one of France's foremost short story writers.

Boule de suif, which appeared in an 1880 collection of stories by several authors, made him an instant member of the literary elite. "The Necklace," however, was considerably different from Maupassant's previous stories; its trick ending surprised many of his readers who were not used to such a jarring reversal of meaning at the end of a story. Other readers of Maupassant thought that the short story format was beneath him, and they would have preferred that he write novels instead.

American readers of the time, however, were fascinated by the author. The first English translation of Maupassant's stories, an 1888 collection entitled *The Odd Number* because it contained thirteen tales, included "The Necklace." In the book's introduction, Henry James, a prominent American writer and advocate of literary realism, praised the stories as "wonderfully concise and direct." Other critics were similarly enthusiastic, comparing Maupassant favorably with such American short story writers as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett.

Some critics, however, doubted that Maupassant's popularity would last. In an essay for the January 16, 1892, edition of the *Illustrated London News,* Irish novelist and critic George Moore insisted that Maupassant would be forgotten by the middle of the twentieth century. On the contrary, his popularity in the English-speaking world has never faltered, due in large part to frequent anthologizing of "The Necklace." In a 1939 survey of seventy-four authors by the journal *Books Abroad,* Maupassant tied with Homer and Walt Whitman for sixth place among the most influential writers of all time.

The continued popularity of "The Necklace" in the United States, however, eventually resulted in a skewed view of Maupassant's writing. Because, as some critics had predicted, many of his works were no longer well-known, he became associated with the surprise ending, even though he did not use it often. Although critics devoted to the short story genre continued to praise Maupassant for his mastery of style and plotting, those whose experience of Maupassant's works was limited to "The Necklace" began to dismiss him as a literary trickster. Indeed, despite renewed attention between World Wars I and II, Maupassant's reputation slipped considerably during the 1950s and 1960s, and his name was rarely mentioned outside of passing references in texts devoted to criticism of short story or realist fiction.

Interest in Maupassant was renewed in 1969 following a special publication of the journal *Europe* devoted to critical analyses of his works. A host of books, essays, and articles followed, but few paid significant attention to "The Necklace." Indeed, since 1980, only two articles have appeared that have focused primarily on "The Necklace"—a 1982 essay by Gerald Prince that examined the relationship between the characters and their names, and a 1985 article by Mary Donaldson-Evans that compared the story with Maupassant's 1883 tale "Les bijoux."

For a story that continues to be included often in modern anthologies, "The Necklace" has received little attention in recent decades, possibly because, as Edward Sullivan wrote in his 1974 presentation *Maupassant et la nouvelle,* it is "too accessible to the public at large." Instead, modern critics tend to pay more attention to the works of Maupassant that were passed over during his lifetime, particularly his novels. Thus, a strange permutation of priorities has come about in Maupassant criticism; those texts that made his reputation, save a few select stories, are today largely ignored while those that were overlooked by his contemporaries are central to modern critical discussions.

Criticism

Jason Pierce

Pierce is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of South Carolina. In the following essay, he comments upon the surprise ending in "The Necklace" and its correlation to the mystery genre.

Discussions of "The Necklace" almost invariably begin with its famous (or, by some accounts, infamous) ending. Much, if not most, of Maupassant's modern reputation in English-speaking countries rests on Madame Forestier's revelation that the original necklace that Madame Loisel borrowed was in fact a fake. Because "The Necklace" has been so often anthologized and so few of the author's other works have been translated into English, the surprise ending is often what the modern reader associates with Maupassant. It is important to understand, however, that the trick ending was not commonly associated with Maupassant during his lifetime, nor was Maupassant its originator. In fact, the surprise ending had existed for some

What Do I Read Next?



- The other short story that competes with "The Necklace" for the title of "Maupassant's masterpiece" is his first published story, "Boule de suif" (1880). Based on Maupassant's experiences as a soldier during the Franco-Prussian War, the story depicts the ravages of war on society and illustrates the hypocrisy of patriotism.
- Another of Maupassant's stories, "The Jewels" ("Les bijoux," 1883), offers a plot that is the reverse of that of "The Necklace," with a character discovering that his deceased wife's supposedly imitation jewelry is in fact real.
- The American novelist and critic Henry James, who considered Maupassant's story a "little perfection," wrote a short story entitled "Paste" based on "The Necklace." Its plot is remarkably similar to that of "The Jewels."
- Gustave Flaubert's 1857 novel *Madame Bovary,* originally condemned as obscene, is today recognized as one of the classic novels of nineteenth-century French literature. Not only was Flaubert Maupassant's mentor, but there are also certain interesting parallels between the novel's title character and Madame Loisel.
- Francis Steegmuller's *Maupassant: A Lion in the Path,* published in 1949, presents a good overview of Maupassant's life, his career as a writer, and his relationship with Flaubert.
- For another example of the surprise ending by one of Maupassant's contemporaries, read "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry. It was collected in his 1906 book *The Four Million* and has been reprinted many times since.
- In his 1819 poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," John Keats examined the relationship between truth and beauty. His conclusion contrasts markedly with Maupassant's.

time, although not necessarily in the form used by Maupassant.

In the mid- to late-nineteenth century during which Maupassant was writing, the mystery story was gaining in popularity as a genre unto itself. Earlier, police "procedurals" and true crime stories—the latter reputedly but not always reliably based on actual events—had been popular, but suspense rarely played any part in these tales. Through the innovations of such notable authors as Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, the mystery genre began to emerge. At its heart was the surprise ending; the solution, the key that unlocked the story's puzzle, was reserved for the ending. Without it, the mystery story would have been just another procedural, following the actions of the characters to their inevitable and foreseeable conclusion. To give their stories suspense, writers delayed revealing all the pertinent "facts of the case," saving certain significant pieces of information for the end. Even today, mystery stories are very rarely true "whodunits" that the reader can solve; instead, the narrative is woven around certain gaps that are only filled in when the true culprit is revealed. The writer teases the audience by mixing tidbits of useful information with enough "red herrings" to make solving the mystery almost impossible. After all, it is the detective's role to solve the mystery; were the reader to solve the mystery, the story's attempt at building tension would be a failure.

With this in mind, it is possible to read "The Necklace" as a sort of mystery story without the traditional trappings of detectives, criminals, and crimes. The mystery here regards what will happen to Madame Loisel. From the outset it is her wants—a want of prestige, of station, of wealth, of material objects—that gives the narrative its tension and suspense. Madame Loisel is defined by what she lacks and what she is not, rather than by what she has and is. She is not a well-rounded character, but

Maupassant did not intend for her to be one. Instead, she is a type—a figure whose motivation is to fill in the gaps in her own character, in the same way that the detective fills in the gaps in the mystery narrative.

In "The Necklace," the mystery comes into play when the main character's gaps are temporarily filled by the ball, the gown, and, most importantly, Madame Forestier's jewels. Although the event and the dress are prerequisites for Madame Loisel's happiness, she is "utterly miserable" and seriously contemplates not going to the Ministry because she lacks jewelry and the appearance of elegance and wealth. It is thus not the accumulated finery that appeases Madame Loisel's feelings of inadequacy but rather the necklace in particular. Whereas before she was filled with "grief, regret, despair, and misery," with Madame Forestier's jewels about her neck Madame Loisel is "elegant, graceful, smiling, and quite above herself with happiness." It is the necklace that transforms Madame Loisel into such a success. Her possession of the necklace, however, is temporary—unlike her dress or her memories of the ball, she cannot hold onto it—and from this arises the story's mystery. What, the reader asks, will happen when Madame Loisel must return the necklace? How will its return affect her? What sort of person will she be when she no longer has the necklace to make her content?

Before these questions can be answered, "The Necklace" undergoes a plot twist—a common element in the mystery genre. Madame Forestier's jewels are somehow lost between the Ministry and the Loisels's home, prompting Monsieur Loisel to search the streets of Paris looking for them, much as a detective from Scotland Yard might track down a criminal in the back alleys of London. Facing the embarrassment of telling Madame Forestier that her jewels have been lost, Madame Loisel is persuaded by her husband to lie to her old friend—to tell her that the clasp has been broken and is being mended so that they will have time to look for the necklace. When they finally give up their search, Madame Loisel declares that they must "see about replacing the diamonds." With this it would seem that the mystery has been solved. The introduction of the necklace into Madame Loisel's life has made her temporarily content, but more importantly, it has produced in her the tendency to lie, even to one of her oldest friends. The incident has revealed that she lacks the moral fiber to admit the truth about Madame Forestier's jewels. As a result of this ethical stumble, the Loisels must learn to cope with hardship and true poverty to a degree that they had never known before. The formerly beautiful Madame Loisel becomes "like all the other strong, hard, coarse women of poor households." This is the effect of the loss of the necklace. With it, she is a grand success, literally the "belle of the ball"; without it, she is a hollow woman, bereft of morals and burdened by poverty.



Madame Loisel is defined by what she lacks and what she is not, rather than by what she has and is."

With the mystery apparently solved, the reader might think that the story should end at this point. Indeed, several critics have argued that its surprise conclusion is unnecessary. In his 1974 book *The Short Story,* Sean O'Faolain argued that "the real merits of the tale as read, do not lie in the cleverness of that ending." O'Faolain believes that Maupassant's genius lies in his characterization of the Loisels and his depiction of the hardships that they encounter. He is partially supported in this position by Francis Steegmuller, the author of an influential Maupassant biography, who regarded "The Necklace" as "inherently inferior" to Maupassant's other works because it is "flawed by improbabilities," by which he meant all of the story's unlikely coincidences, particularly the revelation of the necklace's true value. Despite these critics' wishes to the contrary, the ending is an integral part of Maupassant's story.

If one reads "The Necklace" as a mystery story, then the true trick is not the fact that the diamonds are actually paste but that the mystery with which the story is concerned is itself a deception. The reader is led to believe that the story's central conflict is based on Madame Loisel's social situation and her desire to become a member of a higher class. In fact, however, that conflict is only the basis for the story's true conflict—the disparity between appearances and reality. At the Ministry ball, Madame Loisel's success is a direct result of her appearance of wealth and high social standing, whereas, in reality, she is relatively poor. And yet the key to her success, the symbol of her social prosperity, is itself not what it appears to be. Where-

as the reader thinks that the mystery is how the necklace will affect Madame Loisel's character, in truth the mystery centers on how symbols of wealth and power affect social interaction. Maupassant's story is less the tale of Madame Loisel's rise and fall than a work of social commentary. The reader does not recognize his or her role as "detective" until the story's final line, at which point Maupassant's purpose is laid bare. The effects on Madame Loisel of Madame Forestier's jewels and her experiences at the ball are irrelevant; she is little more than a tool for Maupassant's commentary upon the superficiality of 1880s Parisian society.

The story's ending was necessary for Maupassant to attain his goal. Having achieved the reputation of being France's foremost short story writer, he hardly could have switched to nonfiction social commentary and hoped to reach as great an audience as he garnered with his fiction. In order to ensure that his message would be received by the greatest possible number of readers, it had to be imbedded in a short story, the genre with which he was most closely associated. The story needed to have believable characters, realistic situations (whether or not it has these is a matter of critical debate), and a strong plot in order to disguise its true mission. The ending had to be a surprise because it is where Maupassant chose to insert his social commentary. Had this criticism of French society and its preference for appearance over substance emerged earlier in the text, Maupassant's point would have been lost. He allows the readers to get caught up in appearances before revealing the reality of the situation. This tactic allows the full weight of the plot to be felt by the reader as well as Madame Loisel. By saving his revelation for the end, Maupassant is able to shock his readers, who are just as caught up in appearances as Madame Loisel, and reveal the story's true purpose as a social criticism.

Source: Jason Pierce, "Overview of 'The Necklace'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks

In the following excerpt, the critics examine Maupassant's treatment of time in "The Necklace," in which he alternates between dramatic action and narrative summary.

["The Necklace"] gives us a good chance to consider the problem of the treatment of time in fiction. The story takes Madame Loisel from youth to middle age. Her girlhood is passed over in one sentence in the first paragraph, and the early years of marriage are treated in the second to the fifth paragraphs. Then the time of the ball is treated at considerable length in five direct scenes, the conversation about the dress, the conversation about the jewels, the visit to Madame Forestier, the ball itself, the search for the lost necklace. Then the time of deprivation and payment, ten years, occupies a page or so. Then comes the denouement, the encounter with Madame Forestier in the park.

There is, we see, a sort of balance between the long periods of time treated by summary, and the short periods, treated more or less dramatically by direct rendering. In treating the long periods, in which the eye sweeps, as it were, over a panorama, the writer needs to hit on the important fact, or the essential feeling of the period. He needs to distill out the thing fundamental to the story—the character of the young Madame Loisel, or the way she lived through the ten years of deprivation. In the dramatic—or scenic—treatment the need, however, is to show the process of the movement through the time involved, how there is, step by step, a development; how, for example, Madame Loisel decides to speak to her old friend in the park, how she accosts her, how she discovers the unexpected joy in the thought that the necklace she had bought had successfully deceived Madame Forestier, how Madame Forestier makes the revelation which, for us, will carry the burden of meaning. The scene, in other words, gives the "close-ups" of time, and the summary gives the "long shots."

Often in a summary a writer must give more than mere summary. After all, he is writing fiction, and fiction wants to give the feeling of life, not merely the bare facts. Let us notice how even in the relatively bare summary in which Maupassant presents the years of hardship, he manages by a few specific touches to make us sense the quality of the life of the Loisels. Madame Loisel scraped "her rosy nails on the greasy pots and pans." When she carried up her household water every morning, she had to stop "for breath at every landing." She had become, Maupassant tells us, strong, hard, and rough. Then he writes: "With frowsy hair, skirts askew, and red hands, she talked loud while washing the floor with great swishes of water." It all comes alive with the phrase "great swishes of water." We *see* that.

Some pieces of fiction, even some novels, can proceed almost entirely by scenes, by direct presentation. For instance, "De Mortuis" gives us a single little segment of time, as does "The Girls in Their

Summer Dresses,'' with only a minimum of summarized exposition from the past. In fact, both of these stories, in treating the present time, depend almost entirely on conversation and direct action—more so, for instance, than even ''The Lottery,'' which, also, occupies a single short section of continuing time.

Many stories and almost all novels, however, must swing back and forth between more or less direct treatments and narrative summary with more or less of description and analysis thrown in. It is well to begin to notice how these two basic kinds of treatment (with the various shadings and combinations) are related. We must ask ourselves how much the feeling of a particular story, the logic of its telling, the effect it has on us, are related to the writer's handling of this question of time. Again, there is no rule. We must try to inspect our own reactions as carefully and candidly as possible, and try to imagine what would be the effect, in instance after instance, if a different method were used.

Source: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, ''The Necklace,'' in *Understanding Fiction,* second edition, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, 1959, pp. 106–15.

Sean O'Faolain

In the following excerpt, O'Faolain asserts that the cleverness of ''The Necklace'' lies not in the surprise ending but in its realistic portrayal of human relationships and society.

[In ''La Parure''] we have a civil-servant, with a pretty little wife. They are poor, as, no doubt, civil servants occasionally are. And being pretty and young she wants to go to dances, and receptions, and mix with people from the Legations and so on, as even poor folk do. One day they get an invitation to an important function, a dance—and for the occasion she naturally wants to look her very best. She can make do with her best frock, but she has no jewels, and she fears that without them she will look just as poor as she is. So she borrows a diamond necklace from a rich school-friend, and delighted, off she goes to the dance and has a thoroughly happy time. When it is all over she has to wake up her husband—who has gone to sleep in an anteroom, as husbands will—they go out, get a cab, and off they go, back to their home.

But when she puts her hand to her throat to remove the necklace it is gone! She has lost those priceless diamonds. They go back; they search: they put advertisements in the paper. All in vain. She dare not face her rich friend without them, so what does she do? She goes to the best jeweller in the city and she buys, on the instalment system, an identical necklace. So, that one really happy night of all her life becomes thereby the last happy night of her life; for, now, their poverty is ten times worse than before: they are sunk under this load of debt; and for years and years the two poor creatures slave to pay for those diamonds. Her pretty looks go. Her hair dries up. The wrinkles come. And, then, after about ten years of this penury she meets her old school-friend once again and when her friend commiserates with her on her changed appearance, the once-pretty, still-plucky little woman says, proudly: 'It was all because of you.' And she recounts the sad tale. 'O, my dear child!' says her friend, in agony. 'But how unnecessary! Those diamonds were paste. I bought them for a few francs.'

> "Notice how even in the relatively bare summary in which Maupassant presents the years of hardship, he manages by a few specific touches to make us sense the quality of the life of the Loisels."

Now, that is probably the most famous example in literature of what is known as the 'whip-crack ending.' Those who like Chekov do not like it—it is so hard and so cruel. Personally, I do not particularly like it, but that, I realise, is a mere matter of taste and not of judgment. But the essential point is that this story would still be an excellent story, and some have even held that it would be a better story, if the thing stopped short with the slavery of the little wife and if there were no revelation about the diamonds being paste, no whip-crack ending at all. Those critics maintain that the whip-crack ending is too artificial, too unlikely, too ingenious. In any case, the real merits of the tale as read, do not lie in the cleverness of that ending. The tale has won its spurs long, long before we come to the ending. It has revealed a segment of society in which life is cruelly compressed and wounded. Those two people, man

and wife, are real; their surroundings are real—real, perhaps, in a large typical way rather than in the individualised way which is Chekov's way. They evoke our pity. In short, the story makes its comment on human relationships; though in this case the relationship is social rather than personal. And . . . every story that is a story will, unconsciously, do that.

Source: Sean O'Faolain, "The Technical Struggle: On Subject," in *The Short Story,* The Devin-Adair Co., 1951, pp. 171–92.

Francis Steegmuller

In the following excerpt, Steegmuller maintains that the shock ending of "The Necklace" is the highlight of the story, condemning Maupassant's portrayal of relationships as "vague and unconvincing" and his plot as improbable. Steegmuller also asserts that while Maupassant has a reputation as a specialist in surprise endings, only a few of his stories actually conclude in this manner.

At the smiling moment of his life when he was thirty-four, had built his house at Etretat, hired François, and begun to enjoy his *amours plus elegants,* Maupassant did some of his best and his best-known work. In both these categories can be placed "La Parure" ("The Necklace"), one of the most famous short stories in the world, described by Henry James when it was new as "a little perfection."

Although everyone knows the plot, not everyone knows James's resume of it:

> In "La Parure" a poor young woman, under "social" stress, the need of making an appearance on an important occasion, borrows from an old school friend, now much richer than herself, a pearl [sic] necklace which she has the appalling misfortune to lose by some mischance never afterwards cleared up. Her life and her pride, as well as her husband's with them, become subject, from the hour of the awful accident, to the redemption of this debt; which, effort by effort, sacrifice by sacrifice, franc by franc, with specious pretexts, excuses, a rage of desperate explanation of their failure to restore the missing object, they finally obliterate—all to find that their whole consciousness and life have been convulsed and deformed in vain, that the pearls were but highly artful "imitation" and that their passionate penance has ruined them for nothing.

The particular brilliance with which "La Parure" is written triumphs over a number of improbabilities. (The lack of insurance on the necklace, sometimes mentioned by critics, is not among them: insurance of jewelry in France began to be common only a few years later.) But even a halfway careful reading of the famous tale shows the relationships between the two women and between the heroine and her husband to be vague and unconvincing; and the purchase and successful substitution of the new necklace are of dubious verisimilitude. But the shock of the shattering, crushing end has always endeared the story to the multitude. The common tribute of nonliterary readers of "La Parure"—"It shouldn't have been written! It makes you feel too bad!"—is phrased as a reproach; but actually it is an expression of the intensest pleasure, the ability to be made to "feel bad" by a story being prized by most readers beyond rubies.

Maupassant would have enjoyed that tribute. For he liked very much to make people "feel bad"—to give them, at least, a few bad moments, to shock them and surprise them. The perpetration of what the French call *farces* and we call practical jokes was one of his favorite forms of amusement, and the memoirs of François and of Maupassant's friends are full of examples of the elaborate lengths to which he was willing to go to secure a victim's momentary discomfiture. In addition to "Farce Normande", the story about wedding-night horseplay, he wrote another, "La Farce", which contains two practical jokes, one of them involving an old lady's chamber-pot, and innumerable other tales about victimizations; and in life he enjoyed inviting people to dinner under false pretenses (pretending to be launching an investment scheme, to furnish a needy courtesan of his acquaintance with a wealthy protector in the form of a "Spanish marquis," actually a friend in disguise, to introduce to a group of ladies a charming college boy whom they allow to take certain precocious liberties, not realizing that he is a woman); having François deliver to a lady in her salon a basket full of live frogs, making his dinner guests at Chatou, when he took an apartment there one spring, miss the last train back to Paris; turning mice loose on his boat among lady guests; using filthy language in the hearing of stuffy people; assuring acquaintances that he had once eaten "roast shoulder of woman" and so enjoyed it that he had taken a second portion, and so on. This rather infantile love to shock is a mild expression of the sadism which finds further outlet in his frequent and usually artistically superfluous descriptions of blood—such as the hideous abortion in "L'Enfant", and, in his travel sketches, a sanguinary fight among Mediterranean fishes and a description of the red flesh of watermelons. A brutal, shocking ending

like that of "La Parure" is another expression of the tendency.

Maupassant has an immense reputation as a specialist in stories that end in this way—stories with "trick" or "twist" endings. Considering how deeply engrained in his nature was the desire to shock, he might be expected to have written numerous such stories; but the fact is that he did not. It is impossible to mention a precise figure, since between shock and non-shock there is no clear demarking line, but of Maupassant's more than two hundred short stories a mere handful have endings that can properly be called trick or shocking.

The legend of his being a specialist in this kind of story did not exist during his lifetime. His work was repeatedly and rigorously analyzed by such contemporary critics as Jules Lemaître and Anatole France, men who despite the differences in their approach to literature from that of present-day critics were keenly discriminating and perceptive; and they would without mercy have pointed out the aesthetic inferiority—the drastically diminished pleasure of re-reading—inherent in a large body of Maupassant stories with trick endings, had such a body existed. Present-day critics who make the charge reveal that they are repeating what they have heard or read, that they are not well acquainted with Maupassant. Indeed, the statement that Maupassant's work is generally characterized by trickery can usually be considered a warning: a warning that other inaccuracies are hovering near. When a critic [Edmund Wilson, *The New Yorker,* Dec. 13, 1947] reviewing Henry James's notebooks, for example, says, "One sees that the example of Maupassant—more frequently invoked, I think, than that of any other writer—with his plots that depend on pure trickery, has had much more influence on Henry James than one would ever have expected," he betrays not only a faulty memory of Maupassant, but also a careless reading or interpretation of the work in hand: examination of James's notebooks shows that it is not Maupassant's trickery or plots that Henry James keeps invoking, but Maupassant's enviable ability to write with brevity and compactness.

In exactly one recorded instance Maupassant's "trickery" did influence Henry James and influence him concretely; and on this unique occasion the trickery was that of "La Parure." The origin of his short story "Paste," James tells us, "was to consist but of the ingenious thought of transposing the terms of one of Guy de Maupassant's admirable *contes*—"La Parure."

> **"Even a halfway careful reading of the famous tale shows the relationships between the two women and between the heroine and her husband to be vague and unconvincing."**

It seemed harmless sport simply to turn that situation round—to shift, in other words, the ground of the horrid mistake, making this a matter not of a false treasure supposed to be true and precious, but of a real treasure supposed to be false and hollow: though a new little "drama," a new setting for *my* pearls—and as different as possible from the other—had of course withal to be found.

Source: Francis Steegmuller, "'The Necklace'," in *Maupassant: A Lion in the Path,* Random House, 1949, pp. 203–10.

H. E. Bates

In the following excerpt, Bates discusses Maupassant's ability to combine trick and tragedy into one, asserting that in "The Necklace" it is clear that the author was completely aware of the limitations of the surprise ending.

[To] Maupassant . . . still belongs that supreme *tour de force* of surprise endings, "The Necklace," in which the excellence and the limitation of the method can be perfectly seen. Maupassant's story of the woman who borrows a diamond necklace from a friend, loses it, buys another to replace it, and is condemned to ten years' suffering and poverty by the task of paying off the money, only to make the awful discovery at last that the original necklace was not diamond but paste—this story, dependent though it is for effect on the shock of the last line, differs in one extremely important respect from anything O. Henry ever did. For here, in "The Necklace," trick and tragedy are one. By placing a certain strain on the credulity of the reader (why, one asks, was it not explained in the first place that

the necklace was paste? or why, later, did not Madame Loisel make a clean breast of everything to a friend who had so much trusted her?), by the skilful elimination of probabilities, Maupassant is left holding a shocking and surprising card of which the reader is entirely ignorant. He is entirely ignorant, that is, *the first time.* Like a child who is frightened by the first sudden boo! from round the corner, but knows all about it next time, the reader of "The Necklace" can never be tricked again. For Maupassant is bound to play that card, which is his only by a process of cheating, and having played it can never again repeat its devastating effect. In story-telling, as in parlour games, you can never hope to hoodwink the same person twice. It is only because of Maupassant's skilful delineation of Madame Loisel's tragedy that "The Necklace" survives as a credible piece of realism. Maupassant, the artist, was well aware that the trick alone is its own limitation.

Source: H. E. Bates, "American Writers after Poe," in *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey,* The Writer, Inc., 1941, pp. 46–71.

Douglas Bement

In the following excerpt, Bement offers an interpretation of Maupassant's development of the plot of "The Necklace," believing he may have considered the implications of both greed and innocence to form his story.

We have no clue as to where the idea for ["The Necklace"] originated; it might have sprung from the sight of a paste necklace in a shop window. The keen eye of the storyteller, lighting on it, might have been arrested with the germ of an idea, upon which his imagination set to work. Suppose a person were to buy a necklace at a fabulous price, believing it to be genuine? As the writer played with this idea, some objections must have offered themselves. "What of it?" Maupassant might well have asked himself. "What would it mean? What significance does it have? How is it related to my experience, or to the experience of my fellows? What sort of a person would be apt to buy a paste necklace, thinking it real?"

The last query might well raise the ever-present problem of *probability.* Would it be probable that an average person would buy a paste necklace for a fabulous sum without making an investigation of its true worth? And even if he were duped after having investigated, should we really feel sorry for him; would he stir our emotions; shouldn't we feel him to be something of a fool? And if a person could afford to buy such an expensive trinket, should we feel his loss very much?

But suppose he couldn't afford to buy it? Suppose he were buying it to win the favor of a girl? But neither should we sympathize with a girl who could be so bought, nor with a man who wanted to buy her. Still, he might have his side of the story; that is a possibility.

Eventually, we may suppose, Maupassant hit on the idea of a woman's borrowing the necklace from another, supposing it to be real. She loses the necklace and replaces it with a valuable one. If the borrower were rich, the whole proceeding would be a joke. If she were poor, it would be tragic. If her poverty were shared by another, an innocent victim, it would be still more tragic. The innocent victim might be her husband.

Here Maupassant might well have stopped to take stock. The *idea* is unfolding, but what are its *implications* ? By means of the necklace there is personified all the greed, all the shallow love of costly ornaments, all the striving of so many people to impress others by appearance. Such people are the Biblical whited sepulchres, symbolic of the sham and pretense of society. Here is the oft-recurring human trait of seeming to be what one is not, the desire to appear better than one is.

Here, in this philosophic reflection, enters the observation of life which forms part of the warp of the fabric. Here is the theme which translates the imaginary into the real, "which gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name," which brings the imaginative out of nowhere, imbues it with the spirit of reality, and translates it into terms of life.

Her husband, then, shall be the innocent victim, for she herself, because of her vanity, may not be innocent in our eyes. We are willing that the guilty should suffer; but our emotion is aroused when we see the innocent pay the penalty.

Then, let us suppose, came the question of the characters of the principals of the story. What sort of woman would want to borrow a necklace? She must be vain, but even behind a mask of vanity are hidden human foibles with which we can sympathize. We pity the woman who would be vain just once, if the whole background of her life, like Cinderella's, were a succession of gray days filled with endless dreary routine. Perhaps the woman wanted just one

fling in the world; she shall not be blameless, but at least we may understand.

Then what of the husband? He must be poor, hardworking; he must love his wife enough to give her things even beyond his means; he must be weak enough to be prevailed upon.

And who is the center of the story? On whom shall the spot-light focus? Who is to arouse our most profound emotions? It must be the husband. They will both suffer, but we must be sorrier for him, the innocent victim, than we are for her. . . .

And so we might speculate endlessly and in much greater detail regarding Maupassant and his story. Even without any guidance from the author himself the speculation would be profitable. We are helped to see ultimately through his eyes, and while, in some cases, we may not care for the author's point of view, attitude, interpretation, or material, we can at least see genius at work, shaping to its ends the materials that lie about us daily.

But fortunately there are sources available for us to study with some exactness the germination of story ideas. There are the notebooks of Hawthorne, Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, and others, which tell the struggles which each had with the stories that we have been accustomed to read as finished artistic achievements. And here we are helped to realize that the germination of a story idea is a long and devious process, which calls into play not only the ability to seize upon the idea, but also the faculty for feeling out its significance and its implications. . . .

Source: Douglas Bement, "The Woof—Plot," in *Weaving the Short Story,* Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1931, pp. 65–87.

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In a section entitled "The Technical Struggle: On Subject," O'Faolain addresses "The Necklace," among other works, and argues that the story's merit lies not in its "whip-crack ending" but in Maupassant's portrayal of characters and society.

Steegmuller, Francis. *Maupassant: A Lion in the Path,* Collins, 1949.

Primarily a biography, this work relates much of Maupassant's fiction to his life through the device of psychoanalysis.

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An introduction to Maupassant's *contes* and *nouvelles,* with some useful commentary on "The Necklace."

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Offers an overview of the major figures and movements in French literature and contextualizes Maupassant's writings in terms of his contributions to literary development and his relationships with other authors.