

The Role of Women as Portrayed in “The Necklace”

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The Role of Women in ‘The Necklace’

Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” tells a tale of how a married woman’s misplaced pride and aspirations of grandeur negatively impact her life and warns against taking things at surface level. The heroine is Mathilde Loisel, a young lady whose good looks cause her to resent her middle-class life and husband all the while longing for a life of wealth and prestige. Her foil in many ways is the character of Madame Forestier, notable more for leading the life Mathilde aspires to than for her character in itself. De Maupassant’s women are, as representatives of their time, lacking in autonomy, and thus limited in their ambitions and knowledge. The women’s role in “The Necklace” is in illustrating the folly of a materialistic approach towards life and drawing a sharp focus to the glittering facade and false promise of a charmed and wealthy lifestyle.

The Women

Mathilde Loisel

Upon introduction to Mathilde Loisel, one of the first things the story draws attention to is that for all her dissatisfaction with her lot in life, it is hardly one of hardship. In fact, the Loisels are comfortably middle-class and have avoided the poverty that plagued so many in that time (Yadav, 2019). This provides an immediate insight into her character, as readers see how limited her worldview is, and how she focuses on the surface indicators of a wealthy life (Dugan, 2016). Her dismissal of her kind husband out of frustration with his lowly occupation further reveals her deep and single-minded focus on material possessions, as does her resentment of her old friend who married into wealth.

Madame Forestier

The other woman that plays an integral role in the development of this tale is Madame Jeanne Forestier, whose wealthy husband causes Mathilde’s resentment. Madame Forestier is

also the owner of the necklace that, according to Dugan (2016), “the Loiseles are destroyed by” (p. 26). Madame Forrestier’s character is hardly fleshed out throughout the story, as her function is primarily as the embodiment of “the splendid life of the upper class” the heroine so wants for herself (Yadav, 2019, p. 648). Despite the estrangement that followed her wealthy marriage she warmly welcomes Mathilde into her life and offers her a choice of jewels. Undaunted by the choice of the seemingly exquisite diamond necklace she happily lends it to her friend. Indeed, though her lack of concern is later explained by the false nature of the necklace, it can also be attributed to her wealth. According to Doniger (2017), “borrowing jewelry was quite common among the upper classes at that time” (p. 130), and thus would not have presented a large issue to Madame Forestier. Indeed, the loss of the necklace proved catastrophic to the decidedly middle-class Loiseles precisely because they were not part of the wealthy elite the materialistic Mathilde so envied.

The Dangers of materialism

The primary function of Mathilde Loisel in “The Necklace” is to serve as a cautionary tale against measuring life solely in terms of material wealth and belongings. De Maupassant often wrote the women in his stories as stereotypes, embodying one or more traits that he warned against through the humiliation and critique of his female characters (Syafrina, 2020). In her desperation to be seen as part of high society, the heroine outfits herself far beyond her means, and her triumphant night leads to a decade of hard work and toil for husband and wife. According to Doniger (2017), she “ruined her life paying for diamonds she had borrowed and lost” (p. 130). The fake necklace is wonderfully symbolic, as it represents Mathilde herself the night of the ball. With its loss, she loses many of her pretensions and embarks upon many years of hard work and reduced circumstances, which diminish her physical beauty but improve her inner self.

This in turn can be seen as making her the spiritual victor in the rivalry she herself once pursued with Madame Forrestier, who is seen continuing to enjoy her gilded life of privilege and pretense. Some, such as Dugan (2016) might believe that “the discovery of the truth about the necklace serves to reduce to futile meaninglessness the long tragic passing of years” (p. 158). However, in the end, Mathilde’s perseverance in helping her husband work to reduce their debt is a transformative moment for her character. In this way Mathilde learns to appreciate her life more for what is in it than what is not, all through her years of hardship.

A Glittering facade

The role played by Madame Forrestier is in opening the curtain onto the smoke and mirrors lives of the upper classes. The thought that the necklace borrowed from a wealthy friend was not real did not even remotely cross the Loisel’s minds. The role of this revelation is twofold; firstly, it displays the naïveté of Mathilde who believed that everything was as it looks on the surface. Secondly, it shows the hypocrisy of even wealthy women, not just Mathilde. Madame Forrestier thus fits into the negative stereotype of women as materialistic creatures (Syafрина, 2020). Despite her wealthy lifestyle, she is just as guilty of wanting to be seen as living in the lap of luxury as Mathilde.

The fake necklace, a symbol of wealth and prestige, is nothing more than a trick to fool people into seeing a luxurious existence. De Maupassant does not reveal much of Madame Forrestier’s life other than emphasizing that she had kept her beauty and charm over the years as a result of her privileged and easy life. The revelation of the fake necklace shows her participation in what Doniger (2017) refers to as the “conspicuous consumption” of wealth that the elite displayed, even if lacking in the funds to do so (p. 112). Here, the author shows that the veneer of wealth and luxury was more important to these women than the reality of it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of women in “The Necklace” is in demonstrating de Maupassant’s views on the dangers of excessive devotion to material wealth and the facade of privileged life in nineteenth century France. Mathilde Loisel shows how the desire of luxury at the expense of all other pleasures can ruin a life: it is through her downfall that she learns the value of the life she once had. Madame Forrestier’s role as the supporting female character is anchored in her ties to the heroine and the life she believes she deserves. She acts both as a foil to Mathilde, and as a window into the hypocrisies and lies of the luxurious world that the heroine craves.

References

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