



## THE HEROIC IN THE PROSAIC: REVISITING MAUPASSANT

Dr. ITI ROYCHOWDHURY<sup>1</sup>, K MUTHUVEL<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Prof Amity School of Languages AUMP Gwalior

[iroychowdhury@gwa.amity.edu](mailto:iroychowdhury@gwa.amity.edu)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor Amity School of Languages AUMP Gwalior

[kmuthuvel@gwa.amity.edu](mailto:kmuthuvel@gwa.amity.edu)



Dr. ITI ROYCHOWDHURY

### ABSTRACT

Guy de Maupassant is a master story teller and can justly be called the father of modern short story. Critics tend to dismiss the genre of short story as ephemeral and superficial yet Maupassant's short stories have attained the stature of classics. His craft had the most lasting impact on shaping the writings of the later writers like O Henry and Somerset Maugham. *The Necklace* of Maupassant inspired Maugham to write *Mr Know All* while Henry James wrote *Paste* based on the same source. Maupassant was made a subject of essays on art by Tolstoy. Also Maupassant's stories are next only to Shakespeare as a source for film makers.

In its most rudimentary form, a short story has the following elements: theme, plot, character, setting and conflict. Yet for any work of art to become a classic it needs to surpass the rudimentary and excel in the normal. Maupassant's stories are works of art, his craft a work of inspiration. The objective of the present paper is to explore the reason for the abiding interest in the short stories of Maupassant through a study of his following works: *The Necklace*, *Ball of Fat* and *Two Friends*.

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### INTRODUCTION

The oral tradition of storytelling is as old as human history. Stories of valour and romance, of adventure and miracles relieved the boredom and monotony when there was no other recourse to while away the evening. But as a genre the short story is quite a late entrant in literature and as a craft reached its maturity only by 19th century. The most celebrated writers of short stories are Gogol, Chekhov, O Henry, Saki, Turgenev to name a few. They immortalized the craft with stories like *The Overcoat*, *The Gift of the Magi*, *The Open Window*, *Mumu*, *Lady with a Lapdog*, *Betrothed* etc .

Though his name got obscured by the later writers, one of the founding fathers of the genre of

short story writing is the French writer Guy de Maupassant. His craft had the most lasting impact on shaping the writings of the later writers like O Henry and Somerset Maugham. *The Necklace* of Maupassant inspired Maugham to write *Mr Know All* while Henry James wrote *Paste* based on the same source. Tolstoy made Maupassant a subject of one of his essays on art . Also Maupassant's stories are next only to Shakespeare as a source for film makers.

**Objective:** In its most rudimentary form, a short story has the following elements: theme, plot, character, setting and conflict. Yet for any work of art to become a classic it needs to surpass the rudimentary and excel in the normal. The objective

of the present paper is to explore the reason for the abiding interest in the short stories of Maupassant through a study of the following works: *The Necklace*, *Ball of Fat* and *Two Friends*.

**The Theme:** Maupassant chose to write on the marginalised and the middle classes, painting a picture of their everyday life, moments of illumination of character, moments of epiphany, caught on paper. According to *Authors of the 19th Century*, Maupassant captures 'the little dramas, and daily preoccupations, of ordinary people. He presents his characters dispassionately, foregoing any personal moral judgement on them but always noting the word, the gesture, or even the reticence that betrays each one's essential personality, all the while enhancing the effect by describing the physical and social background against which his characters move.' (*Authors of the 19th Century*, 423) And thus the *Ball of Fat* reads of the little fat prostitute, selling her body but not her soul. Set in the background of Franco Prussian War, *The Ball of Fat* tells the story of several French men and women fleeing the city in a coach in face of imminent occupation by the enemy. It is a motley crowd. Apart from the prostitute herself, there were two nuns, a merchant and his wife, an industrialist and his wife, a count and a countess etc. Fully conscious of her station in life, the Ball of Fat as she was popularly called, makes sure that no attention is drawn to her. It is only when the pangs of hunger compel her that she withdraws her ample supply of food and begins to eat. Maupassant goes on to narrate how the same crowd first uses her food and then her body to escape the enemy and then look down upon the poor hungry creature as she huddles in a corner.

*The Necklace* is a story of a vain young wife, discontented with her lot, who borrows a diamond necklace, then loses it, replaces it, spends her youth on paying off the loan and then discovers that the diamonds were imitation.

In *The Two Friends*, two quiet, retiring men decide to go fishing even in the face of enemy advancement. The joy of the catch soon gets obliterated as they are captured and while the two friends are shot dead, the enemy commander orders cooking of fish that the friends had caught.

**The Endings:** The nature of the genre demands that the ending be dramatic. Conversely the dramatic ending is also the reason why the critics dismiss this genre as populist. Both Maupassant and O Henry who are masters in the twist of plot are accused of contrived and artificial endings in their stories. Lohafer says, "because they (surprise endings) exhibit a simple notion of plot that can easily become simplistic formulaic and trivial" (*The Classic Short Story: The Theory of a Genre 1870-1925*, 97). Exploring this further, Valerie Shaw says, "The main drawback to stories which gain narrative compression by making plot serve a single realization however ironic in quality is that like most jokes or anecdotes they can never arouse the same bafflement and surprise twice over." (*The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*, 56) The argument is irrefutable. Once the reader knows that the necklace for example is fake, there is no compulsion to turn the page to find out what happens next. There is no reason to revisit the story. And yet the readers have been going back to Maupassant's stories across decades and across geographical boundaries.

**The Use of Irony:** The twist at the end notwithstanding, Maupassant's stories have many layers of irony. There is irony in the little cheap whore rising to the defence of her compatriots and country. There is irony in the grand men of society using a women, cajoling her, preaching at her and finally betraying her to sell her body to save their skin. It is ironical that, that most frivolous of women Mathilde who thought only of jewels and clothes, rises above her station even as she stoops to do the most mundane of tasks everyday for a period of 10 years to honor her pledge. Also it is ironical that the two peaceful civilians, who had not gone to war, who chose to spend their money on alcohol even as they starved, who shivered and trembled at the thought of being caught by the enemy, stand resolute and embrace death but do not betray their country. And yet it is not the thought of imminent death but the sight of the caught fish that brings tears to the eyes of the captive.

**The Imagery:** There is very little dialogue in Maupassant's stories. It is the vivid and accurate image of the body speak of the character in which

lies the soul of his characters. Zola exhorts his fellow writers to be observers of life like the physiologists. "the observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes.. He should be a photographer of phenomena, his observations should be an exact representation of nature."(Openbook Publishers) Maupassant is a photographer par excellence. His images are realistic yet evocative.

"A little lantern , carried by a stable boy went out one door from time to time to immediately appear at another The feet of the horses striking the floor could be heard although deadened by the straw and litter..." ( The Entire Original Maupassant Short Stories 43- 54)

or

He left. She remained in her ball dress all evening without the strength to go to bed, sitting on a chair, with no fire, her mind blank." (The Entire Original Maupassant Short Stories)

**The Characters:** The superficial twists and surprise endings have their own appeal and significance. "Ending which jolts us into perceiving something fundamental about what we have been reading."(The Classic Short Story: The Theory of a Genre 1870-1925, 60-62) In case of Maupassant they reveal the character of the protagonist. Maupassant's stories have become eternal as they hold up a mirror to the society and tell tales of things that 'oft were thought though never so well expressed before'. In *The Necklace*, the vain frivolous woman shows her grit and determination when she abandons all comfort and even necessities to pay off the loan. She washed and she scrubbed, she cooked and she cleaned and she who had dreamt of rich tapestries and silver on her table, everyday carries water up a flight of stairs and haggles with the butcher over the price of meat. The woman who had cried because she did not have a dress to wear to the ball, slogs unflinchingly, like a common woman of the market , without complaint for 10 years. In her resolution and in her suffering Mathilde emerges a true heroine. The Ball of Fat was a woman who practised the world's oldest profession and was cognizant of the

stigma attached to it. She kept to herself and ate by herself. She did not seek out the company of her fellow passengers. But she was more resourceful and better prepared for her journey. She who was perceived as low on morals shared her food with her hungry compatriots. She sold her flesh for a living but she did not trade with the enemy. The bourgeoisies who were travelling with her were not as scrupulous. They could partake of her food and her company and motivate her to literally sleep with the enemy and then shun her even as she sits cold and hungry and alone by them. And so once again it is the little woman of the lowest strata of the society who is the real heroine in the everyday drama of life.

*The Two Friends* is a story of a draper and a watchmaker during the Franco Prussian war. Cold and hungry, logical and reasonable, the two men do not display any palpable heroism or chivalry. Though starving, they buy themselves drinks, they tremble with fear in face of enemy and imminent death and the only act of physical courage they display is in braving the odds to go fishing. They get captured. The option is to share vital information with the enemy to save life or die an unheroic, unsung death. The two friends, without consultation but with all the natural fear in the world, choose the latter.

#### Conclusion

Such are the men and women of Maupassant. Essentially simple, neither heroic nor self sacrificing, neither brave nor romantic, these characters find an echo in the heart of every reader because the men and women of Maupassant are us the common everyday people. In their struggle and in their pettiness, in their mannerisms and in their conduct we are looking at ourselves in a mirror- braving life everyday- unsung but heroic

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