

This essay examines Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace" through structuralist and feminist theoretical frameworks, exploring how the story's narrative structure and gender dynamics work together to reveal the constraints placed on women in nineteenth century French society.

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Structuralism, Feminist Theory, and The Necklace

Literary theory is the systematic methods and ideas we use to interpret different literary texts (Tyson). It gives us the tools with which we as readers are able to gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of a literary work. There are many different types of literary theory, and each theory is different. They are frequently formed in defiance or from the support of another theory, and even more often they compete with one another to be “the most (or the only) accurate means of understanding human experience” (Tyson).

It is believed by many theorists that once an author has published their work it loses its connection to that author. Instead, it's given over to the hands of the reader, leaving it up to said reader to understand and interpret the ideas and meanings from their own perspectives. Each theory comes with its own strengths and weaknesses, each able to explore different facets of a literary work to provide new meaning, and understanding these theories provides us with the capability to see ourselves and the world around us through new lenses. These theories can strengthen our ability to think logically, build creativity, and offer different perspectives and interpretations of historical and current events (Tyson). When we gain a better understanding of these different tools, we can better analyze and clarify texts and literature on a much deeper level, creating in us better readers, writers, and humans through these methods of critical

thinking. "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant drew my attention as it seemed to call attention to social issues of our past that I find are also present today. Through the lens of Structuralism and Feminist Theory we are able to explore different meanings found in this story.

The development of structuralism started in the early 1900s with figures like Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Barthes, continuing through many different literary circles through the decades thanks to Roman Jakobson (DeGeorge). This theory focuses on what makes up a work's "Literariness", as well as the way linguistics could be applied to literature and deals best with a work in its entirety (DeGeorge). In interpreting "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant, we can find several tenets of structuralism that can be applied to the text. Binary oppositions are pairs of opposing ideas that are favored in structuralism and are frequently analyzed in a text (Tyson). We will use structuralism to look for recurring patterns that happen in the structure of this story. Finally, we will use structuralism to explore the narrative structure of "The Necklace."

Within this story, we can identify several binary oppositions, with one of the most obvious being that of rich vs. poor. This can be seen in the way the protagonist's middle-class life is regularly compared to the lavish and rich lifestyle she longs for. Maupassant immediately introduces Mathilde as "born by a blunder of destiny" to a family who was not wealthy and would have to work for a living (Maupassant). Her middle-class status seems to be further lowered to symbolize poverty as Maupassant writes, "she was unhappy as though kept out of her own class" giving the impression that not only is she currently of low socioeconomic status, but she also believes she is meant for the upper-class life (Maupassant). The binary opposition of rich vs. poor is also seen in the necklace itself representing wealth. Mathilde is given many choices but is immediately drawn to the diamond necklace above all other options, with Maupassant going further still to describe the necklace as a "treasure" for Mathilde to "escape"

with (Maupassant). She is described as incredibly beautiful, yet she only sees her beauty when wearing the necklace, and the necklace itself poses as a representation of wealth. Unbeknownst to Mathilde, the necklace she borrows is fake and worth only a fraction of the real one she purchases later, it symbolizes wealth itself because even a false diamond seems to raise her socioeconomic status while she wears it. The jewels make people see her differently and pay attention to her at the ball, reinforcing the belief she has in her self-worth as well as the expectations society has for her as a woman (Maupassant).

We can find several recurring patterns in Maupassant's "The Necklace." These recurring patterns can be a way for us to decode the authors' system and find its significance and meaning (DeGeorge). One main pattern to address that is continually repeated is Mathilde's deep desire for "more" and for a higher social class than the one she currently has. We see many instances of her dissatisfaction and desire to have a wealthy and lavish lifestyle, for example when Maupassant describes Mathilde's desire, "She would so much have liked to please, to be envied, to be seductive and sought after." (Maupassant). Indeed, when her husband secures a much-coveted invitation to a ball, the dissatisfaction and desire spring up again in Mathilde. She is unhappy with what she currently has to wear, and she must have a new dress, or she cannot attend the ball (Maupassant). A few days before the ball she is struck again with her dissatisfaction and desire, this time Mathilde finds unhappiness in her lack of jewels and cannot bear to "look poor among a lot of rich women." (Maupassant). In fulfilling her wants and finding the right adornment she attends the ball, feeling fulfilled in her deep desire to be accepted in high society, Maupassant writes, "in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, in a sort of cloud of happiness made up of all these tributes, of all the admirations, of all these awakened desires, of this victory so complete and so sweet to a woman's heart." (Maupassant). Once she has her desires fulfilled,

she begins to know true dissatisfaction as she and her husband become truly poor in an effort to replace the lost necklace, spending the next ten years repaying their debts (Maupassant). In this way, they finally experience the true hardship of poverty the way Mathilde had previously compared her middle-class life to beforehand.

In Maupassant's "The Necklace", we can see the narrative structure follows a linear progression without any significant jumps in time or flashbacks to disrupt the flow of the narrative (Tyson). The story begins with its exposition, setting the stage for Mathilde's unhappiness in her current life as she "suffered intensely" under her circumstances (Maupassant). This is where we are shown her intense desire for a better socioeconomic class. Then, we see the climax of the story where the Loisels realize the necklace is missing. This comes directly after Mathilde's desires are fulfilled at the ball, and in this moment, the couple chooses to lie about the loss of the necklace and instead replace it in secret. The two spend ten years paying off the cost of the replacement necklace, finding themselves truly poor and discovering what hardships poor life entails. At the resolution of the story, Maupassant includes a twist ending. It is revealed by Madame Forestier that the original necklace was itself a fake, worth no more than five hundred francs (Maupassant). This revelation is intended to shock the reader, the same way it shocked Mathilde Loisel. The irony is not lost that Mathilde's story-long struggle with vanity and desire comes back to bite her here. Her desire for more and her dissatisfaction with what she had drove her further into the poverty and misery she tried to get away from. In this way, the structure of the narrative supports the ideals society has of people during this time. Highlighting how the desire and drive for wealth and status often leave us poorer than when we started.

As shown in the few examples here, structuralism provides a very helpful lens for analyzing Guy de Maupassant's story, "The Necklace." Through this lens, we see the underlying

patterns designed to give the story its meaning and the binary oppositions like poverty/wealth that drive the story's plot. Through the lens of structuralism, we can view the way in which "The Necklace" highlights the societal structures and expectations of the time.

When we use the lens of structuralism on "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant, we can view the story as an interpretation of social norms and societal structures. The binary opposition of poverty vs. wealth highlights the societal divide between Mathilde Loisel's reality of her middle-class life, and the fantasy of a lavish lifestyle in the upper class that she desires and feels is far superior to the one she has. Poverty and wealth are contrasted in several ways, with Maupassant drawing attention to her in the beginning as "unhappy as though kept out of her own class." (Maupassant). Mathilde's internal struggle is revealed as the desire to be a part of a higher social class, with the necklace representing the life she wants, only to in the end become part of the reason for her downfall. The recurring pattern of the protagonist's desire and eventual pursuit of that higher social class is eventually what leads to her downfall into true poverty, the exact opposite of the upper-class status she longed to be a part of (Maupassant). Maupassant uses a narrative structure that follows a linear progression, which helps to highlight the irony at the resolution of the story in the reveal that the original necklace was in fact, fake. This twist ending and the symbology of the borrowed necklace show the importance society places on wealth and status, the ruinous power class structures can wield, as well as the deception in appearances.

Feminist literary criticism originated with the political feminist movements that sought equal rights for women, reemerging following the political climate of the United States in the 1960s and then for a 3rd time in the 1990s (Tyson). Specifically, feminism gives us the framework to analyze a text based on how it reflects and promotes gender inequality, how it shows relationships between men and women, and how all of us have been programmed to see

the world from a patriarchal perspective (Tyson). In interpreting "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant, we can find several tenets of feminist theory that can be applied to the story. One common tenet favored among feminist critics is a critique of the patriarchy. Another common tenet and one found within "The Necklace" is that of patriarchal binary thought or binary opposition, found in the form of masculine vs. feminine (Tyson). Finally, we will also explore the concept of the male gaze and objectification present in the story. As a recovering patriarchal woman myself, I hold many of my own biases and experiences related to feminism and its tenets, therefore I find myself in a constant struggle to be aware of how the patriarchy has influenced my thinking and opinions.

In many ways, the patriarchal influence in "The Necklace" is obvious when we examine how Mathilde's feelings of self-worth and success are tied to her social status as well as society's beauty and wealth standards. During the 1880s upper and middle-class women had very limited choices, which usually only included marriage and motherhood or spinsterhood, and were continual victims of "social and economic discrimination" (Cruea). A woman's social standing, relevance, and financial security were completely dependent on her father, and following him, her husband. The patriarchy has but two distinct features, being the "rule of the father and the rule of the husband" with the reinforcement of obedience taught to girls from birth (Gruber). We can see this in the example when Maupassant says, "for women have no caste and no descent, their beauty, their grace, and their charm serving them instead of birth and fortune." (Maupassant). In addition, we see it in the obedience Mathilde gives her husband as she follows his command without question to, "write to your friend, that you have broken the clasp of her necklace and that you are having it repaired. That will give us time to turn around." (Maupassant). Because her husband is the one who makes the rules in her life, regardless of the

social standing she longs for, Mathilde follows his instructions without question or hesitation. This follows the "rule of the husband" feature of patriarchy, just as her marriage follows the "rule of the father" feature since her husband was chosen for her (Cruea). These traditional gender roles and patriarchal rules push Mathilde's self-doubt and her desire for higher social standing.

In feminist literary theory, the male and female can be seen as binary oppositions, referred to as patriarchal binary thought, where the female aspect is always associated with the inferior ideal (Tyson). In this male-dominated society, the reinforced idea that women are born inherently inferior to men is called biological essentialism (Tyson). In this case, Monsieur Loisel can be seen as the logical, reasonable, and practical male (superior) side of this binary opposition. He tries to make his wife happy by procuring her an invitation to a ball, giving her money for a dress, and suggesting she borrow jewelry from a friend (Maupassant). In contrast, Mathilde is obsessed with her social status and desperate to be a part of a higher social class than she was born and married into, shown when she says she feels "unhappy as though kept out of her own class" (Maupassant). Her materialistic desires, obsession with the necklace, and focus on her appearance and status are seen here as negative traits, driving the story and placing her on the female (inferior) side of the binary opposition.

In "The Necklace" there is a large focus on Mathilde's physical appearance both before and after the necklace is lost reinforcing the tenet of objectification and the male gaze. Maupassant frequently mentions Mathilde's appearance, for example starting the story by saying she is, "She was one of those pretty and charming girls." (Maupassant). These comments about Mathilde's appearance give the idea that her value lies only in her looks. Within the male-dominated society attracting a good husband who could support and take care of them was one of the few options women had, and frequently this choice was taken from them completely and left

up to their fathers or other male heads of the household (Cruea). With these patriarchal standards of society, women were harshly judged and, in many ways, defined by their physical appearance. Maupassant highlights this by stating, "She was the prettiest of them all, elegant, gracious, smiling, and mad with joy. All the men were looking at her, inquiring her name, asking to be introduced." (Maupassant). Once again, male approval is highlighted and celebrated for Mathilde as the necklace seemingly enhances her beauty and prestige. Mathilde's physical appearance and beauty are referenced very positively before the loss of the necklace when her social status is still at a middle-class level yet discussed negatively once she loses the necklace and becomes poor and hardened by work (Maupassant). He references her differently once the necklace is replaced and paid off saying, "Mme. Loisel seemed aged now. She had become the robust woman, hard and rough, of a poor household. Badly combed, with her skirts awry and her hands red, her voice was loud, and she washed the floor with splashing water." a stark contrast to her previous description (Maupassant).

By examining these different tenets, we can use the framework of feminist literary theory to explore the different facets of the patriarchy at work in the everyday lives of women in the late 1800s. Feminism can help uncover the ways in which societal power structures and patriarchal norms are intertwined in the story, "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant. This lens shows us the unique experiences and struggles faced by women during that time, as well as the major role the male-dominated society plays in promoting inequality.

When we analyze Maupassant's "The Necklace" through the lens of feminist criticism, we can see the story as a powerful critique of the many social expectations and restrictions that are placed on women. It highlights how the persistent influence of the patriarchy places intense pressure on women regarding their appearance as well as social status. This influence is seen

when Maupassant says, "for women have no caste and no descent, their beauty, their grace, and their charm serving them instead of birth and fortune." (Maupassant). Mathilde, despite her desires for a finer life, is forced into a box based on her husband's job and fortune. Trapped in an ever-persistent desire for more out of life, but unable to escape the status given to her husband, and her father before him. In this story, the binary opposition of male vs. female plays a large role in highlighting the social restrictions placed on women. Monsieur Loisel is seen to represent the logical, reasonable, and practical male "superior" side of the binary opposition. He seems to accept their middle-class life, trying to make his wife happy and showing concern for her (Maupassant). Madame Loisel instead is presented as obsessive over social status, consumed by her desire for upper-class life, and overall, ungrateful for what they have at the start of the story, representing the female "inferior" side of the binary opposition. Examples of the male gaze and objectification are also pulled from this story by Maupassant. Before the necklace has been lost, and the Loisel's are forced to work themselves poor to pay it back, Mathilde is referenced as "prettiest of them all, elegant, gracious, smiling, and mad with joy. All the men were looking at her, inquiring her name, asking to be introduced." (Maupassant). The male approval is highlighted when Mathilde feels her most beautiful and looks her most wealthy with an expensive necklace. However, once the prestige is gone, and the money is spent on a replacement necklace, the tone shifts. Mathilde is no longer the most beautiful of women but instead considered a "robust woman, hard and rough, of a poor household. Badly combed, with her skirts awry and her hands red, her voice was loud, and she washed the floor with splashing water." (Maupassant). This shift in tone once Mathilde's material possessions and physical beauty are stripped away highlights the value women hold in a patriarchal society as well as the pressure they are put under to maintain as positive an image as they are able.

Ultimately, Feminist theory and Structuralism are important tools designed to help us better understand the underlying meaning behind different stories. In their own ways, each theory helps us navigate our personal bias to find these new messages within a literary work. By using both theories, I could see a change in my interpretation of the story from what I originally thought about it. Instead of it being a simple lesson about materialism, the overall message instead becomes one about the overwhelming influence of societal and social expectations of the time, and one that specifically discusses the expectations society has of women. This is shown through structuralism and feminist theory in several ways and examples, and each theory highlights important aspects of the way societal expectations impacted people in the 1880s. Literary theory helps create an important framework within literary studies. It provides us with the necessary tools and lenses that help us gain a deeper understanding of a literary work, digging beneath the surface to find different and diverse perspectives in a story, and uncovering our own biases. All these things given to us by literary theory ultimately help to broaden our analysis by examining the use of language by an author, the symbolism, narrative structure, and interaction between the words put on paper and the context of the story.

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