

**MAUPASSANT'S *THE NECKLACE* AS A FICTIONAL MEANS OF ASSUAGING
THE ILLUSIONS OF LIFE: THE WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT: *The world we live in is an illusion. Unwary people kill themselves for worldly things that easily fade away. Many marriages in different societies of the world shatter simply because the spouses aspire to live above their standard. Most times, some women coerce their husbands into borrowing to buy costly wears for them simply to appear flamboyantly and be noticed in the society. Some people go to the extent of doing every odd thing just to give people the impression that they belong to the aristocratic class in their societies. Fiction is a work of imagination but then, an X-ray of life. This being the case, fiction is not only read for the mere entertainment that it offers, it is also read for the knowledge it offers. Many families today break indiscriminately because the spouses long to own what they cannot afford. In this paper therefore, the researcher examines the role of fiction as it pertains to helping couples live meaningful life in society with particular reference to Maupassant's *The Necklace*.*

KEYWORDS: Fiction, illusion, flamboyant, *The Necklace*, Jewels, Maupassant

INTRODUCTION

Fiction denotes any work of imagination. According to Nnyagu (2018), the word fiction simply denotes invented stories usually applied to novels, short stories, novellas, romances, fables and all other narrative works in prose. What this actually entails is that fiction is not a documentation of any historical fact, rather, it is a work of art not usually in poetic form but in prosaic manner. However, Abrams (2008), observes that fiction encompasses all invented stories irrespective of the manner of presentation. He classifies fiction into *inclusive sense* and *narrower sense*. In an inclusive sense, Abrams sees fiction as any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened. In a similar vein, to Myers-Shaffer (2000), fiction is an imaginative literary narrative that can be in the form of prose, poetry, or drama. According to him, most fiction falls into one of the several types based primarily on length. He goes further to demonstrate by chronicling the forms of fiction as well as giving a picture of the characteristics of each for easier understanding and appreciation. The novel for instance, he sees as an extended prose narrative that is fiction and that generally, novel-length works are divided into chapters. Abrams (2008), further observes that the term "novel" is now applied to great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of *fiction* written in prose.

Myers-Shaffer (2000), reveals that Samuel Richardson's *Pamela (Virtue Rewarded)* was the first English novel. Novelette, Myers-Shaffer says is shorter than the novel but more tightly structured. *Novelette* generally consists of about 15,000 to 50,000 words. Baldick (2004), looks at novelette as a trivial or cheaply sensational novel or *romance.... (174). He further describes *Short Story* as that which is very tightly structured with a formal development. Similarly, Baldick describes short story as a fictional prose tale of no specific length, but too

short to be published as a volume on its own. In the same vein, Meyers-Shaffer is of the opinion that short story ranges from 500 (in the short-short story) to 15,000 words. He includes *Anecdote* as another form of fiction. In his own view, anecdote is a single episode (an incident) and simply referred to as gossip. According to Meyers-Shaffer, "... today, anecdote refers to any episodic narrative and is very popular among magazine article writers as an attention-getting device to introduce their subjects (73).

Essentially, apart from that fiction in the inclusive sense includes all works of art whether prose, drama or poetry, what actually distinguishes the different forms of fiction is basically their length.

The image of the Woman in *The Necklace*

Women globally, are obsessed with the outward appearance. This is why some women in many homes would opt to use the money meant for feeding to buy jewels for themselves. In most homes in the contemporary societies, not only in Africa but almost all over the world, we hear of many funny things some women do just to afford some costly wears and jewels. Some young women, in order to own such costly wears and jewels, go with sugar daddies and some married women leave their husbands and follow wealthier men who they believe that can afford to grant their requests and do favour to them. Maupassant probably might have had an experience as he vividly explores that fact in his fiction. Mathilde, a poor but beautiful young woman, marries Mr. Loisel, a poor clerk in the Ministry of Education. Poor Mr. Loisel cannot afford to meet up with Mathilde's insatiable desire for costly wears. Perpetually, she appears moody and sad and that is a source of concern to her poor husband. Maupassant describes Mathilde as a simple person, without the money to dress well. According to him, "... but she was as unhappy as if she had gone through bankruptcy, for women have neither rank nor race. In place of high birth or important family connection, they can rely only on their beauty, their grace, and their charm" (4).

It is not surprising that Mathilde is always perturbed about what ordinarily a man would see as nothing. Women cherish ornaments and when they don't have it, it seems to them as though something so indispensable has been taken out of them. In Igbo societies, for instance, women are regarded as *ori aku*. The onus is on the men to go and struggle under the sun and in the rain to get wealth and the onus is on the women to enjoy the wealth. Any woman whose husband cannot afford to get enough wealth for her unappeasable needs is perennially dismayed. Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, is praised and regarded as hero because he is able to fend for his numerous wives. Maupassant makes it vivid that Mathilde is always agonized not because she abhors her husband but because he is unable to meet up with her unimaginable wants. Even as she knows about the financial capacity of her husband, Mathilde still desires desperately for very costly ornaments. In the words of Maupassant,

She daydreamed of large, silent anterooms, decorated with oriented tapestries and lighted by high bronze lamps, with two elegant valets in short culottes dozing in large armchairs under the effects of forced-air heaters. She imagined large drawing rooms draped in the most expensive silks, with fine end tables on which were placed knickknacks of inestimable value. She dreamed of the perfume of dainty private rooms, which were designed only for intimate tête-à-tête with the closest friends, who because of their

achievements and fame would make her the envy of all other women (5).

Maupassant goes further to state that despite the fact that she is poor and her husband too, all that she longs for all those things that would make people see her as being in the aristocratic class. He discloses that she had no decent dresses, no jewels, nothing. And she loved nothing but these; she believed herself born only for these. She burned with desire to please, to be envied, to be attractive and sought after (5).

The Insatiable Needs of Some Women

Mathilde is a woman and she has penchant for clubbing and partying. These delight her so much and she wishes so desperately to be taken to exotic parties daily. She spurns her husband for being dry in that aspect. Mathilde's moody condition is a source of worry to the husband who cannot do anything to help. Every time Loisel comes back home and sees his wife in a poignant mood, he feels bad. In order to appease her, he strives and manages to get an invitation for two to a sumptuous party. This he believes, would make Mathilde happy. He comes home in high hopes that she would at least, be euphoric. As Maupassant puts it, "Well, one evening, her husband came home glowing and carrying a large envelope." Anticipating to be embraced with joy, he gives the envelope to her and she quickly tears open the envelope and takes out a card engraved with these words "THE CHANCELLOR OF EDUCATION and MRS GEORGE RAMPONNEAU request that MR. AND MRS. LOISEL do them the honor of coming to dinner at the Ministry of Education on the evening of January 8". According to Maupassant, instead of being delighted, as her husband had hoped, she threw the invitation spitefully on the table, muttering: "What do you expect me to do with this?"

The question appalls Loisel. All his efforts had been to make her happy despite whatever condition. The woman had always lamented that she had never attended any party and the husband had observed that she became an insomniac as a result and so he managed to get the invitation just to make her glad. Loisel thus says to her, "But honey, I thought you'd be glad. You never get to go out, and this is a special occasion! I had a lot of trouble getting the invitation. Everyone wants one. The demand is high and not many clerks get invited. Everyone important will be there" (6). Loisel's statement reveals how much he actually suffered just to get his wife happy. It is disheartening when such efforts are not appreciated but for the love of the husband, he listens to her still as she continues with her unending requests. This time around, she comes with the demand of out of the ordinary dress to wear to the party to be noticed. Loisel suggests, "But your theatre dress. That seems nice to me" The husband is right of course. For whom does the wife dress to appease if not him? But for the insatiable wants of some women, she seems more aggravated by the suggestion. All that she actually needs is her own costly jewels. Maupassant makes it very categorical when he writes that:

He stopped, amazed and bewildered, as his wife began to cry. Large tears fell slowly from the corners of her eyes to her mouth. He said falteringly: "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

But with strong effort she had recovered, and she answered calmly as she wiped her damp cheeks: Nothing, except that I have nothing to wear and therefore can't go to the party. Give your invitation to

someone else at the office whose wife will have nicer clothes than mine" (6).

Mathilde's response to the husband that he can give the invitation to someone else in his office whose wife will have nicer clothes to wear is a subtle way most women use to tell their husbands that they are defaulting in their duty as a man to provide for their husbands. The unwary husband who takes the statement serious and thus gives out the invitation as told would simply *buy* more troubles to himself. Loisel understands this trait of women. Though he is distressed, he decides to forfeit an important proposal he has made just to keep the family and make the unfathomable wife happy. He says. "Well. All right, Mathilde. How much would a new dress cost, something you could use at other times, but not anything fancy (6)?"

Loisel is opposite his wife; he is prudent and caring. The quality of him we see from his statement. "...something you could use at other times, but not anything fancy." He believes that getting the dress would make his wife happy. It is obvious that probably, one of the things that actually attracted her to Loisel in marriage is because both belong to the same social class. This coheres with what is actually tenable in real life which is that families of similar social status get attracted to the other. Despite how pretty Mathilde is, no man from the aristocratic family has come to marry her and none would have because wealthy or aristocratic men marry from elevated families too.

Ordinarily, Mathilde should have considered her family background and made her home an exemplary one. Loisel has managed to get her the dress and she begins to press hard for jewel, not just jewels but expensive one that would easily endear her to all. Maupassant puts it this way,

"As the day of the party drew near, Mrs. Loisel seemed sad, uneasy, anxious, even though her gown was all ready. One evening her husband said to her. "What's the matter? You've been acting funny for several days."

She answered: "It's awful, but I don't have any jewels to wear, not a single gem, nothing to dress up my outfit, I'll look like a beggar. I'd almost rather not go to the party" (7).

One would think that she is right for a woman naturally should dress well but what she fails to understand as a matter of fact is that what makes one's outfit beautiful is not how costly one's dress is. One can appear pretty in one's cheap outfit. What actually matters is how one maintains what one has. Loisel's response to her, "You can wear a corsage of cut flowers. This year it's all the rage. For only ten francs you can get two or three gorgeous roses" makes it categorical that they have an alternative. But she, being materialistic, would not yield to the suggestion. She thus responds to him, "No ... there's nothing more humiliating than looking shabby in the company of rich women."

Dangers of Opting for Fake Lifestyle

Mathilde would not allow her husband to be. She knows his financial capability and what he had forgone just to get what he had got for her. She believes herself born only for decent dresses, jewels and so she has burning desire to please, to be envied, to be attractive and sought after (5). She keeps disturbing her husband about the expensive jewels she needs for

the party albeit she is aware that the poor man cannot afford her desired jewels. As she is always wont to do, each time she desires for a particular thing from her husband, she becomes moody again and refuses to talk to him. He has acquired almost everything she needs to attend the noble party apart from the jewels. She has refused to adjust and make do with the suggestion of the husband to go for the one they could afford when it is perceptible that they cannot afford the costly one she desires. She believes that it is only the costly one that would endear her to other wealthy women that would attend the party. Loisel, left with no other option, suggests that since she has a wealthy friend who has what she needs, that she should go and borrow from her. Surprisingly, she agrees to go to Mrs. Forrestier and borrow from her. Mrs. Forrestier is among the wealthy women that she longs to be like. Mathilde has the chimera that whatever the woman wears is a costly one and she longs so much to be like her. This illusion is akin to illusion people have about Richard Cory. He is seen by people as a perfect gentleman who has everything in the world and has absolutely nothing that pinches him. Everyone wants to be in his shoes believing that he lacks nothing. This illusion continues till Richard Cory commits suicide thus making it known to the people that as a mortal, he does not possess everything on earth, no mortal does.

Mathilde goes to Mrs. Forrestier and asks for her most expensive jewels. She is allowed to make her choice. Having shown her the jewels she had for her to choose, Mathilde asks, "Do you have anything else?" This shows that she needs the best and that among the ones provided for her, none catches her fancy. According to Maupassant,

She saw bracelets, then a pearl necklace, then a Venetian cross of finely worked gold and gems. She tried on the jewels in front of a mirror, and hesitated, unable to make up her mind about each one. She kept asking: "Do you have anything else?" (7)

Mrs. Forrestier, has many of them. She says to her, "Certainly, look to your heart's contents. I don't know what you'd like best."

Mathilde longs to be like her just like everyone wants to be like Richard Cory. Like the people do not know what Richard Cory is actually going through, Mathilde does not know how her presumed friend got the jewels and the quality. Maupassant writes that suddenly, she finds a superb diamond necklace in a black satin box, and her heart throbs with desire for it. According to the author, "Her hands shook as she picked it up. She fastened it around her neck, watched it gleam at her throat, and looked at herself ecstatically.... Then she asked and anxiously: "Could you lend me this? Nothing but this?" (7)

Mathilde's request is granted and she eventually goes to the party and enjoys herself. According to the author, she falls on top of the world and "She did not leave until four o'clock in the morning. Her husband, since midnight, had been sleeping in a little empty room with three other men whose wives had also been enjoying themselves" (7). She loses the necklace and that is a source of worry to her and her husband for they cannot afford to repay the diamond necklace and they cannot go to Mrs. Forrestier to tell her that her precious necklace has got lost. This is the danger of longing to live above one's standard. The English adage says that one should cut one's coat according to one's size. Mathilde fails to put that into consideration and now that the diamond jewels is lost, it dawns on her that life is not what it seems. Imagine the pain the couple will go through to repay the lost jewels. First, as Maupassant puts it, "the next day they took the case which had contained the necklace and

went to the jeweler whose name was inside. He looked at his books: “I wasn’t the one, Madam, who sold the necklace. I only made the case” (9).

Maupassant vivifies the agony the woman subjects the family into when he writes that

Then they went from jeweler to jeweler, searching for a necklace like the other one, racking their memories, both of them sick with worries and anguish.

In a shop in the Palaise-Royal, they found a necklace of diamonds that seemed to them exactly like the one they were looking for. It was priced at forty thousand francs. They could buy it for thirty-six thousand (9).

The amount for the jewels is amazing. Mr. Loisel would not have been in the mess had his wife been prudent. The lost jewel must be paid for and so, as the author put it, “They got the jeweler to promise not to sell it for three days” (9).

Most men in real life go through the perils Mathilde has subjected her husband into just to keep the family and make their materialistic wives happy. Maupassant vividly X-rays the pains Mr. Loisel goes through thus;

Loisel had saved eighteen thousand francs that his father had left him. He would have to borrow the rest.

He borrowed, asking a thousand francs from one, five hundred from another, five Louis here, three loius there. He wrote promissory notes, undertook ruinous obligations, did business with finance companies himself for the remainder of his days, risked his signature without knowing whether he would be able to honor it; and terrified by anguish over the future, by the black misery that was about to descend on him, by the prospect of all kinds of physical deprivations and moral tortures, he went to get the new necklace, and put down thirty-six thousand francs on the jeweler’s counter (9).

Fiction as an Indispensable Means of Fighting Illusion

Nnyagu (2018), says that through literature, we understand societies. By this, he means that literature (Fiction) aids understanding of life. According to him, a good literature, for example, when it chronicles the sufferings of a poor innocent victim of circumstance and of course, his triumph over his perils, it gives hope and pleasure to the audience who has a similar experience with the fictional character (25). This is why Perrine (1978), says that unless fiction gives something more than pleasure, it hardly justifies itself as a subject of college study. Nnyagu and Perrine are aware that one of the major functions of literature is to delight but literature also has as its major duty to educate. The two believe that should not perform one function without performing the other. According to Perrine, “Unless it expands or refines our minds or quickens our sense of life, its value is not appreciably greater than that of a miniature golf, bridge, or ping-pong. To have a compelling claim on our attention, it must yield not only enjoyment but understanding” (*of life*) (3). (*Emphasis mine*).

Matthew Arnold is a Victorian critic with Romantic impulse. He had earlier made it clear that it is only poetry that would help man understand his world. By poetry, Arnold actually means the imaginative literature generally. Arnold's claim that literature helps man to live, consolidates the fact that literature has been of immense importance to man even in the Victorian era. Arnold believes that the importance of literature can never be overemphasized when he says that man would soon realize that it is only poetry (literature) that would help him (human beings) to live meaningful life. According to him, literature does the work by interpreting life for human beings.

The world is indeed an illusion. That is why people go through series of perils trying to survive. As stated by literary critics, literature helps to fight illusions of life. Literature does this onerous task by exposing illusions of life through fictional characters and settings. The audience reads a work of art not only for the pleasure that it offers but also for the crucial message that it carries. It is a fact that no author writes with the sole aim to delight; there is always a message about life that an author aims to pass across in addition to the entertainment that his or her work offers. Maupassant uses his fiction, *The Necklace* to educate the unwary women and of course, the general public that world is not what it seems and therefore that people should be mindful of what they do. Mathilde aspires to be noticed in society. She looks at other women who appear flamboyantly in the society and she longs to appear like them too. In her quest to be noticed, she fails to appreciate her husband's efforts to fend for her from his meager income. She has already had the delusion that the other wealthy women she wants to ape, spend fortune to acquire what they wear in order to look distinguished. Perceptibly, any woman in Mathilde's class who reads Maupassant's *The Necklace* would certainly see the dangers of trying to live fake life and then would readjust.

No sane woman in real life delights in seeing the beloved husband suffer unnecessarily just for her to appear unnecessarily sophisticated in the society. But then it is a fact that women delight pleasurable life. The untold hardship that Mathilde subjects her husband into in order to repay the lost diamond jewels is a lesson to many women. The savings that would have been used for the family upkeep has gone into repaying the supposed expensive diamond jewels. Not only that, the husband takes loan on exorbitant interest rate just to save his face and exonerate his wife too from embarrassment. The author's apt presentation of the plot vivifies as well as brings to life, the whole episode so that the reader reads with emotional attachments. At the end of the story, even Mathilde herself is disillusioned. The reader blames her for many mistakes and has empathy for the poor husband who undergoes the difficulties. The episode that inspired Maupassant in penning down the work of fiction is not a trivial one. This is what Wilbur (2001), refers to as fictional dream. He quotes John Gardener, a successful novelist and Professor of Creative Writing as saying that, "The fictional dream must be a strong one to sustain the writer through a complete novel" (22).

Maupassant's Real Message in *The Necklace*

Indeed, Maupassant has in this short fiction, passed across a very crucial message to the audience. Some women are simply thorns in the sides of their husbands over mere illusions. In different societies of the world today, some women are only interested in appearing flamboyantly in the society. They thus, tend to compete with the wives of affluent men in the society in terms of costly wears. When their husbands are unable to afford their demands, they tend to make the homes hardly conducive for their husbands. Most times, the wealthy women they try to ape, buy less costly wears and still appear noticeable in the public. Mathilde is an example of such irrational women. Because Mrs. Forrester her friend is rich,

Mathilde believes that everything she wears is costly. She therefore, fails to put into consideration that being extravagant with the little one has, will endear one to perpetual penury; the person will have little or no saving that would make him or her wealthy. Of course, Mrs. Forrestier, presumed by Mathilde to be extravagant, is simply prudent. She does not go for very costly jewels despite her status; she goes for cheap but beautiful ones. That is what Mathilde fails to understand and that is why she lures her husband into untold hardship just to wear best and most costly things. They thus see hell trying to repay the lost jewels. Maupassant writes that, “Mrs. Loisel soon discovered the horrible life of the needy.... That horrifying debt had to be paid. They dismissed the maid; they changed their address; they rented an attic flat” (10). Maupassant makes it more vivid when he writes that Mathilde learn to do the work of the maid. According to him:

She learned to do the heavy housework, dry kitchen jobs. She washed the dishes, wearing away her manicured fingernails on greasy pots and encrusted baking dishes. She handwashed dirty linen, shirts, and dish towels that she hung out on the line to dry. Each morning, she took the garbage down to the street, and she carried up water, stopping at each floor to catch her breath. And, dressed in cheap house dresses, she went to the fruit dealer, the grocer, the butchers, with her basket under her arms, haggling, insulting, defending her measly cash penny by penny.

They had to make installment payments every month, and, to buy more time, to refinance the loans.

Her husband worked evenings to make fair copies of tradesmen’s account. And late into the night he made copies of five cents a page (10).

The couple manages to buy the costly diamond jewel and as Mathilde had prayed, Mrs. Forrestier fails to open the case of the jewels when she has it to her. She only frowns that she did not bring it when she actually needed it. “You should have brought it back sooner; I might have needed it (9).

The stress that the couple goes through to repay the diamond ornament tells on the wife. According to Maupassant, “At the end of ten years, they had paid back everything – everything – including the extra charges imposed by loan sharks and the accumulation of compound interest.” It is a long period of intense suffering and starvation thus, the author reports that,

Mrs. Loisel looked old now. She had become the strong, hard, and rude woman of poor households. Her hair unkempt, with uneven skirts and rough, red hands, she spoke loudly, washed floors with large buckets of water. But sometimes, when her husband was at work, she sat down near the window, and she dreamed of that evening so long ago, of that party, where she had been beautiful and so admired (10).

Within these long years, Mrs. Forrestier has not seen her and eventually when she sees her, she fails to recognize her for her shabby looks but Mathilde still recognizes her. According to

the author, "It was Mrs. Forrestier, still youthful, still beautiful, still attractive" (10). It is at the process of their dialogue, when Mrs. Forrestier cares to know why her friend looks so old and haggard that the truth unveils. Mathilde tells her that she suffered to replace the diamond jewels and probably, Mrs. Forrestier had opened it. She marvels and imagines what her poor friend must have gone through to buy the real diamond jewels in place of her cheap one. She indicts her friend for not telling her that she has lost the jewels instead of going through hell to replace it with the illusion that the one learnt to her was genuine diamond. In pity, she asks her friend, "You say that you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?" and Mathilde affirms that she did. The author records that Mrs. Forrestier is deeply moved. She reveals to her astonishment that hers was not a real diamond. "Oh, my poor Mathilde! But mine was only costume jewelry. At most, it was worth only five hundred francs!" (11).

SUMMARY

Apparently, Maupassant may have had a similar experience as he so tactically gives a realistic picture of day-to-day experiences of some men in the marital homes. According to Kennedy, Gioia and Bauderlein (2009), historical and other factual writing inspire the other and that all that the author does is to simply shape the history or the factual episode in such a way that they are somehow distinct from the real thing (64). Maupassant really had a wonderful message and he has so wonderfully used his ingenuity to pass across the message to the audience. The work has not only entertained the audience but has also educated. He, as a matter of fact, has used apt diction to embellish the work so that as the reader reads, the message is made vivid to him. The fundamental message of the author in the short fiction actually moved the researcher to analyze the work so that message becomes categorical to the general audience. A lot of men in real world go through the condition of Mr. Loisel and a lot of women in the contemporary societies of the world still live the life of Mathilde. The researcher believes that this work would help in no small means to educate such people and help them come out from the illusions of life.

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