

GENDER, MARRIAGE, POWER DYNAMICS: A MATERIALIST FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT'S SHORT STORY *THE NECKLACE*

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Abstract

In this study, *The Necklace* (1884) by Guy de Maupassant is analyzed in the light of materialist feminism, in which the suffering of Mathilde Loisel is not caused by personal act of vanity but rather structural inequality within the marriage and housework conditions. This study provides this gap by placing the story of Maupassant in the larger context of criticism of patriarchal capitalism, based on the contributions of materialist feminist theorists. The study employs a qualitative interpretive study based on the feminist literary criticism in which the materialist feminism guides it. The research study presents the power of marriage, domestic labor and symbolic capital through a close textual analysis situated within the historical understanding of the French Third Republic to analyze the impact of these three structures in influencing the life of Mathilde. Theoretical sources used to make the analysis include work by Christine Delphy (1984), Silvia Federici (2004), and Simone de Beauvoir (1949). The results indicate that the dependency of Mathilde on her modest position as a clerk of her husband, her momentary use of symbolic capital by way of adornment, and her 10 years of laborious, unseen work is a testament to the keeping house by women. Even the necklace itself becomes a symbol of capitalist patriarchy that is supposed to change the world but instead, shows the ineffectiveness of the system where looks matter more than reality.

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INTRODUCTION

France was in the late nineteenth century experiencing radical social, political and cultural change. The French Third Republic formed in 1870 brought about the democratic reforms and promoted the unification of new civic institutions. But even with these modernization tendencies, women were legally and economically dependent in the family. The Napoleonic Code, which was adopted in 1804 and remained in force when Guy de Maupassant was still alive, put wives at the mercy of their husbands, legally depriving them of property, wages, and civic rights. According to historian Joan Scott (1988), marriage during the period was a civil contract that institutionalized the economic helplessness of women and romanticized feminine sacrifice (p. 96). In such a way, the alleged development of republican France was accompanied by the strongly-rooted patriarchal systems which determined the daily life of women.

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This paradox of the mass modernization and individual inferiority is the necessary setting to the short story *The Necklace* by Maupassant (1884). This story focuses on Mathilde Loisel, a woman of middle class who is not satisfied with her simple life. She dreams of money and glamour, so she decides to borrow a necklace to visit a ball, only to lose it and spend ten years living a grueling life paying off a debt that does not exist when she finds out that the necklace was a fake one. Although the story is often interpreted as a moral fable regarding the issue of vanity and pride, when interpreted through the lens of a materialist feminist theory, the story can be seen as a critique of the economic system that determines the reliance and invisibility of women.

Materialist feminism places greater importance on the fact that the oppression of women cannot be isolated of economical relations. Patriarchy is not merely cultural as argued by Christine Delphy (1984), it is material, constructed on the free labor of women at home and their reliance in marriage. In a similar manner, Silvia Federici (2004) illustrates how the work of women, whether domestic, reproductive or emotional, has been systematically underestimated within the context of capitalism despite the fact that it is the one that nourishes households and economies. The path of Mathilde Loisel reflects such dynamics: her value is determined by her simple clerkship as a wife, her momentary status is determined by her ornaments, her final destiny is ten years of domestic unpaid work that kills her health without bringing her any prestige.

Despite over a century of interpretation, however, a large body of scholarship has narrowed the meaning of *The Necklace* to moralistic teaching or critique by class. Some of the initial critics like Emile Faguet (1905) interpreted the tale as a parable against vanity, and made Mathilde the warning example who never allowed herself to be raised on the simple household virtue. Subsequent critics following the Marxist approach focused on the satire of bourgeois consumerism (Cogny, 1964; Mitterand, 1976). As valuable as these views are in bringing out key aspects of the text, they fail to identify the extent to which the dynamics of classes are highly gendered, and that marriage is a form of economic containment, of women in particular.

This gap is filled through a materialist feminist approach that puts the fate of Mathilde in the context of wider structures of patriarchal capitalism. Women are oppressed by the hidden or unpaid labor that supports the family as well as the economy, as Delphy (1984) points out. The ten years of the pauper life of Mathilde demonstrates this relationship: she supports her family physically, but she has nothing and holds nothing in society. She has not just been a victim of individual misjudgment, but the injustices of the system.

Therefore, the main issue that the current study will be focused on is the necessity of feminist analysis pre-empting marriage as economic subordinating institution. Through materialist feminism perspective, the Analysis of *The Necklace* uncovers how Maupassant not only criticizes the bourgeois pretensions but also the patriarchal economy that constitutes the role, work and identity of women.

This is important to the scholarship of Maupassant, as well as to feminist literary criticism. In the case of Maupassant, it exposes how not only does his realism portray the life of the bourgeois but it also questions its mechanisms that are oppressive. To feminist criticism it shows the relevance of materialist analysis in revealing the economic basis of the subordination of women. Lastly, the research is relevant to the current context: even nowadays, women all over the world are still overburdened with unpaid household chores, whereas the consumer culture perpetuates the perception that beauty and luxury can guarantee empowerment.

1. What does *The Necklace* portray about the institution of women being economically reliant through marriage in late nineteenth-century France?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EARLY FORMALISTIC AND MORALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

Critics in the early twentieth century would tend to see *The Necklace* as a simple parable of pride that is being punished. According to Emile Faguet (1905), Mathilde Loisel was a petulant dreamer who had been punished because she could not embrace her lowly position (p. 112). The story showed them and others the perils of wishing to be rich and the goodness of contentment with where they were. Jules Claretie (1910) also referred to Maupassant as a moralist masquerading as a realist, and continues to insist that the downfall of Mathilde is a classic expression of the eternal retribution of vanity. These readings fit into the conservative spirit of the French Third Republic, where literature was supposed to promote domestic morals, meekness and social harmony.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND MARXIST READINGS

Marxist criticism revived in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the social upheaval and intellectual ferment of the time. *The Necklace* became more and more frequently the subject of commentators on the materialism of the bourgeoisie and consumer society. Pierre Cogny (1964) maintained that Maupassant exposes the cold economy of appearances in which the bourgeoisie traps itself in show business. Henri Mitterand (1976) also pointed out the alienating nature of the consumer culture, and interpreted the story as the critique of the capitalist spectacle.

Marxist approaches redefined the failure of Mathilde as a result of structural pressures of the class system and not personal vanity. The ball dress, the necklace and the tiny apartment were not props but symbols of aspiration and constraint of class. The misery of Mathilde was justified by a capitalist system that saw value in the look and make, and purchase.

FEMINIST CRITICISM: FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

The 1970s and 1980s Second-wave feminism upended literary studies by preempting the experience of women, and revealing patriarchal practices. Elaine Showalter (1985) suggested that *The Necklace* reveals the marriage contract between bourgeoisie as a form of

female containment in which the beauty and the docility of the wife are the currencies in a patriarchal economy (p. 67). Mathilde in this reading is not a dreamer that is yet vain but a woman who is molded by the patriarchal ideology where her worth is measured by the looks and acceptance by men.

These feminist strategies were a vital breakthrough as they centered the idea of patriarchy and demonstrated the way in which *The Necklace* enacts the idea of women being confined by cultural structures. But lots of such readings, though enlightening, do downplay the economic foundation of the oppression that Mathilde experienced. Her display of femininity during the ball was, perhaps an interesting subject to study but it remained bound to structural realities her husband earned a living, she did not have a dowry and her unpaid housework. In this case materialist feminism can be more insightful.

MATERIALIST FEMINISM: ECONOMIC RELIANCE AND HOUSEHOLD WORK

Materialist feminism pays more attention to the fact that the subordination of women can never be decoupled with the economic structures. In her work, Christine Delphy (1984) referred to a mode of production in which the unpaid labor of women in their homes is exploited on a systematic basis, and she called this patriarchy. Silvia Federici (2004) also pointed out the role of women in capitalist systems, being the ones whose reproductive and household labor is invisible, yet without which capitalist systems cannot exist. This tradition was developed further by Heidi Hartmann (1979) and Lise Vogel (1983) who connected patriarchy with capitalism to show the two system of oppression, one of which women experience.

When applied to *The Necklace*, materialist feminism repositioning the story of Mathilde causes one to see it as an exploitation by the system. Her value is pegged on the clerkship of her husband, which implies the Napoleonic Code of that era that disenfranchised women and subordinated their civic identity to that of their husbands (Scott, 1988). The ephemeral glamour she has at the ball is only made possible by the fact that her husband is making a financial sacrifice and a borrowed necklace, which illustrates her financial reliance.

Materialist feminism therefore provides a more comprehensive view of *The Necklace* in comparison to moralistic, formalist or even pure feminist approaches.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive design is used in this research and it is most appropriate in revealing the social meaning that lies behind literary texts. Qualitative methods enable investigation of how language, narrative structure and character interactions reflect structural inequalities, rather than quantifying them. This study explores the intersection of marriage, gender, and economic dependence in *The Necklace* (1884) by Guy de Maupassant, which is why a qualitative approach would allow reading the text closely and interpreting the context with a feminist focus.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

MARRIAGE AS A SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRACT

The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant (1884) has frequently been interpreted as a tale of pride, sloppiness and moral punishment. However, the story can be read as a miniature critique of the systems of patriarchy and capitalism working together when it is viewed through the prism of materialist feminism. The life of Mathilde Loisel has not been described merely in terms of her desires and mistakes but rather in terms of the economic structures that bind her to the marriage, force her to work invisibly and seduce her to see the riches she is not.

An analysis of Mathilde as a victim would only be realized through the context of marriage under the French legal and social systems of the nineteenth century. Napoleonic code actually absorbed the civic personality of a married woman under the jurisdiction of her husband. Women were not allowed to possess property by themselves, enter into contracts, and manage the wages they earned outside the home (Perrot, 1990). Marriage had then been rather a monetary contract than a loving relationship, ensuring material survival at the cost of female independence.

Mathilde, who, as the story begins, has no dowry, no expectations, no way of being recognized or loved by a wealthy man, is structurally disadvantaged at the start of the story. She is without wealth or property and this limits her marriage choices to men with moderate wealth. Her material future is determined by marrying Monsieur Loisel, a petty official in the government. She lives in a small flat, has simple food, and is always embarrassed with her poor situation. Maupassant makes a point of marking precisely that her dissatisfaction is not superficial but indicative of structural imbalances of marriage. She does not have the freedom to make her own choices in life; her status in society is pegged on the earnings of her husband.

The work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* can still be used here as the author examines marriage as the fate which society traditionally provides to women (1949, p. 445). To Mathilde marriage is not a pathway of love or self-realization but the tool through which her dependence is imposed. Her worthlessness and the desire to luxuriant lifestyle are explained by the fact that only her identity is appreciated as long as she represents the economic status of her husband.

Mathilde Loisel is presented in the very first lines of *The Necklace* not as an independent person, but as a woman that is characterized by her married realities. She is one of those pretty and charming girls who was born in a family of clerks, had no dowry, no expectations, and no means of becoming known, appreciated, loved and married by a rich man (Maupassant, 1884/2004, p. 85). This narrative brings out the economic aspect of marriage during the nineteenth century since, when a woman lacked money, property, or dowry, her choice was limited to humble marriages which guaranteed a woman a living but not a life of their own.

Christine Delphy (1984) theorizes marriage as a place of patriarchal exploitation in which the labor and identity of women are made over by men in the status of a husband. According to the Napoleonic Code, the legal personality of a married lady was practically absorbed in the personality of her husband; a wife was not able to own property or even control remuneration on her own (Scott, 1988). Therefore, the marriage between Mathilde and Monsieur Loisel is not a marriage of love as much as a financial deal which binds her inexorably.

The material demarcations of her life are determined by the fact that her husband is a low-ranking government clerk: she lives in a small apartment, eats simple food, and wears plain clothes. Her dissatisfaction, which is manifested in elements of her fantasy of fine china, fancy salons, and aristocratic admiration is more than vanity but an appreciation of her limited opportunities in the economic contract of marriage. The marriage is the destiny that society traditionally provides women with (as Beauvoir (1949) noted), and in the case of Mathilde, it is a destiny of restriction (p. 445).

The scene at the Ministry ball explains that the role of a wife is subordinated to the position of a husband. The invitation he gets at his place of work by Monsieur Loisel gives him hope of satisfying his wife. However, for Mathilde this possibility is not a grant of leisure but of duty: she has to be beautiful enough to make her husband more prestigious among his colleagues. Her beauty turns out to be symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977), as it is the symbol of the masculinity and social value of her husband. This dynamic is the classic example of patriarchal transformation of wives to become the continuation of class position of their husbands when the agency of wives is not taken into account much.

DOMESTIC LABOR AND THE INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN WORK

The second part of the story reflects one of the most vivid images of undervalued labor of women in the nineteenth-century literature. Mathilde and her husband take the necklace away, then they resign themselves to paying their supposed debt after they have lost the necklace. The story itself condenses a decade of physical effort into several draining sentences: Mathilde became acquainted with the hard work of the house, the abhorrent efforts of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, the stained linen, and dishcloths, which she hung up on a line; she would carry down the refuse to the street each morning, and up the water carrying at each landing to rest. Her dress was that of a woman of the people, she visited the fruiterer, the grocer, the butcher, her basket on her arm, haggling, abusing, vindicating her poor money sou sou (Maupassant, 1884/2004, p. 93).

This extract is the culmination of what Federici (2004) refers to as an invisibility of reproductive labor of women. The unending domestic work that Mathilde has to do: washing, cleaning, cooking, carrying, etc., is the keystone to the survival of this family but it is not even given a social value. It is really a kind of early aging her: she now looked old. She was already the mistress of poor families, robust, grim, and rugged (Maupassant, 1884/2004, p. 94). The story is a vivid depiction of physical pain of unwaged labor and it echoes the idea presented by Federici that capitalism is dependent on the exploitation of women and it removes its worth.

Monsieur Loisel, on the other hand, contributes to the repayment by doing more clerical tasks and copying in the late hours. His work, though tiring, is compensated and it is called work. Mathilde's is not. This split highlights the fact that as Delphy (1984) says, patriarchy and capitalism meet each other to form a dual system of exploitation: the work of men is commodified, that of women is naturalized and invisible.

The invisibility of the sacrifice of Mathilde is especially crushing since it annuls the very feminine value that provided her with the symbolic power. She is no longer the one who was praised at the ball as beautiful, and now is torn and battered and unrecognizable even by Madame Forestier. In both instances--decorative beauty and manual labor--she finds her identity in being someone who maintains the demands of the patriarchy thing: first, as ornamental wife, then as quiet worker.

THE NECKLACE AS A SYMBOL OF THE FALSE PRETENSIONS OF PATRIARCHAL CAPITALISM

The literary career of Maupassant appeared in the period of scientific French realism and naturalism, which aimed to document life as it was, without any veil of disguise. According to Robert Lethbridge (1998), Maupassant has mastered the conte genre by combining the succinctness of journalism with the social insightfulness of a novelist (p. 57). His narratives tend to reveal the underlying conflicts of the bourgeois society, showing the way that the issues of the classes, sex, and ethics collide to bring about human suffering.

The Necklace displays the realism of Maupassant through the careful details about domestic interiors, clothing and meals. These are not just background details but pointers of social status. The fact that Mathilde desires a more elaborate environment is what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would subsequently call symbolic capital, i.e. prestige as a result of cultural signals like fashion, refinement, and elegance. With women especially, symbolic capital was in many instances their sole negotiating tool in status, as education and employment remained rare.

The revelation that the necklace is a worthless thing that comes to a climax transforms the meaning of the story. At the same time, it is an ironic twist. In another, it solidifies the attack that Maupassant makes on the illusions that make the bourgeois society survive. Ten years of industry and lost youth, were a waste of suffering to Mathilde.

Based on the materialist feminist view, the necklace represents the false hopes of patriarchal capitalism. It seems to bring Mathilde strength and fame, when in the real sense, it brings out her weakness. The feeling of empowerment which she had momentarily felt at the ball, as she danced with rapture and men admired her and women envied her, was all made possible by borrowed jewels and temporary adornment. After the loss of the necklace, the illusion of agency is ruined.

The idea of symbolic capital proposed by Bourdieu (1977) can be used to understand the sense of value that the necklace had: in the bourgeois world, appearances themselves

become a currency. In the case of women, whose economic possibilities were lower, ornament became a very important form of bargaining social position. However, as Maupassant shows, this symbolic capital is weak and has to rely on material objects which may disappear within a night.

Materialist feminists make us aware of the fact that the loss of the necklace is not the tragedy, but the exploitation that is to accompany it. Ten years of uncompensated work by Mathilde highlights the role of the female body that supports the same system to oppress women themselves. Delphy (1984) asserts that it is not just a passive victim of women but workers whose work is appropriated in a systematic manner. The literal representation of this exploitation is the physical degradation of Mathilde: the house economy has eaten her body and has left her with nothing other than fatigue.

The necklace, therefore, is not just a piece of plot. It is an analogy of the falsehood of patriarchal vows. Similar to the jewels, the concept that beauty and marriage can empower women is not true. All that is left is the harsh truth of institutional inequality: the value of women based on their looks, the fact that their work is unrecorded, and they are deprived of their free will.

The chapter has used a materialist feminist approach to examine *The Necklace* using three themes that relate to each other; marriage as a socio-economic contract, domestic labor as an unseen form of exploitation, and the necklace as a bearer of capitalist illusion. These analyses combined confirm that Mathilde is not to blame for her tragedy but the failure of the system to prioritize and address issues of inequality that are inherent in patriarchal capitalism.

Marriage takes away her independence, homework eats up her body unappreciated, and the necklace reveals the hopelessness of figurative wealth. The realism of Maupassant will therefore predict most of the observations of materialist feminism, showing how fiction can help women understand the economic basis of their oppression. Through the destruction of Mathilde, *The Necklace* is a critique of the very systems that relegated women in the nineteenth century France and still, in most aspects, influence the gendered labor in the modern world.

SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS

The study adds to the criticism of Maupassant by introducing the story of *The Necklace* into a materialist feminist context. Where the critics of the previous century focused on irony, ethics, or class criticism, this discussion has given evidence of how the story reveals the economic subordination of women, and attributes a proto-feminist criticism to Maupassant.

It also helps to make feminist literary criticism more valuable as it shows the importance of materialist analysis. The study provides the ways in which feminist criticism can help us see the structural basis of gender oppression in literary texts, by preempting economic reliance and exploitation of labour.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Even though written in 1884, *The Necklace* is very familiar with the modern discussion concerning gender, labor, and consumer culture. Feminists are still grappling with unequal burden of housework, which is unpaid (Hochschild and Machung, 2012), and the consumer culture is continuing to sell beauty and luxury as means of empowerment. The situation of Mathilde, in which her value is determined by her beauty, her work is unrecognized, her aspirations are suppressed by the inherent order of things, still seems as modern as it was at the beginning of the 19th century.

In this respect, the story of Maupassant can be viewed as historical document and living commentary. It is a reminder that despite the changes in social conditions, the systems, which devalue women work and sell their value, have only acquired new shapes.

FINAL REFLECTION

With the help of a materialist feminist perspective *The Necklace* becomes a tale of much more than vanity or misfortune. It is a story of structural oppression, marriage is imposed, housework is unacknowledged, and material possessions mask oppression. The tragedy of Mathilde Loisel is not in the fact that one necklace is lost but that society turns women into commodities and deprives them of their self-determination.

The short story by Maupassant foreshadows a lot of the findings of the twentieth-century feminist movement by putting these dynamics into the limelight. It also asks the readers to see beyond appearances; jewels, beauty and social status and to challenge the legacy of inequality that has been living its life on women.

CONCLUSION

The institution of marriage is not presented as a romantic relationship but as an economic contract which makes Mathilde dependent. Her conditions of material are provided by her husband as a clerk and her value is determined by the way she projects his social position.

The discussion revealed that marriage, according to the Napoleon Code, was a socio-economic contract as opposed to an egalitarian relationship. The identity and opportunities of Mathilde are tied to the small wage of her husband and the symbolic power that she can have in the form of adornment is only meant to show him in a good light. Accordingly, marriage is portrayed as structural dependence in the story.

Instead of the moral lesson of vanity, *The Necklace* comes out as the criticism of social order that determines the value of women in comparison with men, exploiting their efforts and work unpaid, and tempting them with the false image of life by the way of jewelry.

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