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Struggle of Social Classes in Maupassant's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

Among the galaxy of short story writers, Guy de Maupassant was the most versatile and brilliant, who enriched French literature between the year 1800 and 1900. His stories cover the panorama of French life at the end of the nineteenth century. In numerous of stories he demonstrates struggle of social classes. Such noteworthy stories are "The Necklace", "The Beggar", "A Piece of String", "Simon's Papa" and "Boule de Suif", in which we find the struggle of social classes. His works reflect his interest in the emotional problems of social classes. He deeply studied different aspects of life around him and reveals the same in his stories, which are characterized by his economy of style and minutely observation of the problems, the pain, the inconveniences and sufferings of the society.

Keywords: Social classes, Struggle, Suffering, Stories, French life.

In the nineteenth century, Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was one of the greatest French writers. He is widely regarded as the father of modern short story writing. He inspired 19th century society with over three hundred short stories and six novels that deal with the mundane, the abstract, the psychological self and relevant issues in society. His stories are often autobiographical in nature, and several of them focus on the dilemma of rejected women and children of an ill-fated liaison, and explore the problems of identity and the individual's place in a rigid social structure. His stories cover the panorama of French life at the end of the nineteenth century, including different social classes and their struggle.

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There are numerous stories which focus primarily on social struggle, in which we find the struggle of social classes. The suitable examples of such stories are: "The Necklace", "The Beggar", "A Piece of String", "Simon's Papa"and "Boule de Suif". (Kuhn)

In nineteenth century France, there was a struggle between social classes. The middle class was aspiring to elevate its social status. For instance, the relevant and overarching story of Maupassant is "The Necklace," in which we can visualize the struggle of social classes. In the opening of the story we see that Maupassant starts off with examining Mathilde's social standing and her history:" The girl was one of those pretty and charming young creatures who sometimes are born, as if by a slip of fate, into a family of clerks." (Maupassant 204)

Since she could bring no dowry, she marries a clerk in the Ministry of Education. An important element of this story is Mathilde's financial background. In the nineteenth century, prominent women had to possess a dowry to enable them to marry. Mathilde grew up in a simple family, and even married above her status and means. Maupassant uses the character of Mathilde Loisel to represent the impossibility of social ascension. She is unable to gain the status she dreams of; in fact, her desires lead to her downfall:

> Mathilde suffered ceaselessly, feeling herself born to enjoy all delicacies and luxuries. She was distressed at the poverty of her dwelling, at the bareness of the wall, at the shabby chairs, the ugliness of the curtains. (Maupassant 204)

However, she suffered ceaselessly since she felt herself born for all the delicacies and all the luxuries. Her materialism prompts her to borrow Madame Froestier's necklace which, unfortunately, gets lost. This results in her becoming a part of the working class that makes her suffer both physically and socially. Mathilde had the ambition of possessing expensive objects and being admired by others. Her desire to be counted among the upper class leads to her downfall. The catastrophe starts with the loss of the borrowed necklace which she had to recompense by buying another one. This leads to the loss of her beauty and also her servant and lodging.

Madame Loisel, who is fond of being part of the elite without any substance though, unfortunately her personality full of beauty, delicacy and elegance is alone not sufficient for marrying a man of wealth and distinction. Therefore, she marries a simple clerk. We see in this story that Mathilde is in conflict with herself, with others and with society also. Not only this; but also loss of time for a worthless object, highlights the theme that social ascension is unattainable.

In this story Maupassant demonstrates the unfeasibility of social advance through Mathilde Loisel, who is unable to fulfill her ambition due to her powerlessness over the social structure of the society. Hence, "The Necklace" embodies the social struggle between Mathilde and Madame Froestier and more generally between the social classes.

When we glimpse through another story "The Beggar", we find that this story also demonstrates social polarities and struggle of social classes. The protagonist of the story Cloche, the beggar, is often victimized and is described as society's prey. This is an example of rampant pessimism present in the story. Cloche hunts for a hen.

He is a hunter for his own survival. Dichotomy of society reveals that even though he himself is a hunter of chicken, he is at the bottom of the social hierarchy and is not strong enough to withstand society's hunting of beggars and outcastes. Cloche begs for food, but no one offers him any. He is starving and when he finds a hen, he tries to kill it, but instead of giving him food, the villagers arrest him. Later he is found dead. The severe injustice constantly portrayed seems to describe a social problem, in which society has a hand in killing Cloche.

Like "The Necklace" and "The Beggar", "A Piece of String" also illustrates the same problem, struggle of social classes. In this story, we see how the protagonist Maitre Hauchecorne is trapped in the clutches of the society. Maitre Hauchecorne's trouble begins when he finds a piece of thin string on the ground. Unfortunately, the habit of picking string lands him in trouble. Hauchecorne's odd behaviour of picking up string draws suspicion on him. When it is discovered that a wallet containing five hundred francs has gone missing, Malandin accuses Hauchecorne of stealing it. Hauchecorne pleads that he had not stolen it, but no one believes him. The wallet is reported to have been found on the road and returned to its master by an illiterate person. Still society blames him and considers him a thief. In the town, he is even attacked physically and branded "a rogue." The story about false accusation and the futility in worrying over what others think, especially when they think he is lying, and there is no way to prove it due to class discrimination and distinction. Because of the status of a peasant no one is willing to listen to Hauchecorne's side of the story. On the other hand, his enemy, a person of high status, speaks a lie that Hauchecorne has stolen the purse. Each and every one trusts his words without any evidences and any proof.

"What grieved me," said he, "was not the thing itself, do you understand, but it was being accused of lying. Nothing does you so much harm as being in disgrace for lying" (Albert 8). In this story also we see that Maupassant shows a conflict between man and society. As for the protagonist in the story, he is a very economical person and considers all things valuable. Due to this philosophy he is accused and doomed to death. He wants to prove his innocence even at the last stage, and his lip fluttering with these words: "A little bit of string—a little bit of string. See, here it is, M'sieu le Maire" that his innocence will be proved even after his death (Albert 8). Peasants are perceived, even by those in the same class, to be untrustworthy. The entire town believes that Hauchecorne is guilty, but the reality is that he is not guilty. He is treated like a criminal for the rest of his life. If Hauchecorne had been an aristocrat, would he have been tortured in this way? Probably not; this was because of his social status.

Another noteworthy example of social struggle is Maupassant's autobiographical short story "Simon's Papa." This story tells the tale of a fatherless boy named Simon. In the opening of the story, we see that he goes to school the first day and instead of being welcomed, all the children start teasing him by saying that he has no papa. A merely seven years old boy feels terrific on hearing the name of the school. Each day all the other children tease him, play nasty tricks, and not only this, but also they begin to laugh monstrously and repeat in loud voice that he has no papa." The children were

dumbfounded by this extraordinary, impossible monstrous thing –a boy who had no papa; they looked upon him as phenomenon, an unnatural being..." (Bourget 152).

All the children in the school treat Simon as a guilty boy and it seems that he had committed a crime because of that he had no father. Day by day, cruelty of the children increases and Simon repents on his ill fate. He lives in melancholy and fears the mischievous school children. The heart broken words echo in his ear: "No papa!" He becomes restless and hence, one day he decides to take his own life. He remembers of someone who drowned himself because of lack of money. He also makesup his mind to drown himself because he has no father. Fortunately he is saved by a blacksmith named Philip. He tells Simon to go home; your mother will give you Papa. When he comes near his mother, he starts weeping and tells her that he doesn't desire to live anymore because school boys beat him because he does not have papa. Abruptly he asks Philip, "will you be my Papa?" Philip says in jest yes, I will. After that Simon says in school that he has a papa whose name is Philip. Again the boys start mocking him and askif Philip is his Mama's husband. In such circumstances Philip ultimately becomes his legal father.

Maupassant depicts human lives and destinies and social forces often in pessimistic ways that picturise the pressure and pinching problems in society. We see that society treats Simon's mother with a somewhat disdainful compassion. Thus this story illustrates the dilemma of rejected women and ill-fated child who faces the problem of identity in society. Like the piece of string, Simon's papa focuses on how human experiences cope with suffering, and characters' troubles and misfortunes and undergo social struggle for survival in the society.

In "Boule de Suif", we see that the reality of selfishness and discrimination in class and creed is revealed. One of the main themes of "Boule de Suif" is how much stronger class loyalties are than patriotic loyalties. Boule de Suif is often pictured as a victim of class social system. The protagonist is caught in a repetitious cycle of self-examination that has forced her into a circular ethical conundrum. All the while her position is created not on her accord, but through the manipulation of spiteful members of the respectable social order.

As we see in the story the three couples –the Carre-Lamodon, the De Brevile and the Loiseau, all symbolize the political and the aristocratic. There are two nuns who are also considered respectable because of being dedicated to God. But inside the coach, there is a single prostitute, Boule de Suif, which is considered a fringe element of the social order, dedicated to hedonism and unrespectable person in society. When Loiseau announces that she has a hollow in her stomach, she becomes restless because of hunger and none of the coach members bring any food material to eat. At that time Boule de Suif gives food from her basket to eat to Loiseau and also to other passengers. She is the only magnanimous passenger who brings food in full basket and shares with her co-passengers at the time of grief. When their coach stops in the village of Totes, a German officer orders the passengers to stay in the local inn until Boule de Suif agrees to sleep with him. As a patriotic French woman, she refuses to yield to the blackmailing. But on the other side, all the other passengers insist on her to go.

All added their voices to that of count; Boule de Suif was begged, urged, lectured, and at last convinced; everyone was afraid of the complication which might result in headstrong action on her part. She said finally, "I am doing it for your sakes remember that. (Maupassant, "Boule de Suif")

But what happens in reality, instead of thanking her, all the passengers avoid her; they scorn her, and not only this, they also call her shameful. Even they do not offer her food, who has been so generous during the earlier trip. The protagonist, a magnanimous character is caught in repetitious cycle of self-examination that has forced her into a circular ethical conundrum. All their position is created of her own accord, but through the manipulation of spiteful members of the respectable social order. Maupassant's superb sense of crafting art gives the vivid account of social struggle in these above representative short stories.

Every artist is the embodiment of social norms of the society he lives in. The more he transmits the social values and norms through his writing, his art gets enriched and attains enough perfection to contribute to the episteme and paradigm of the age. Maupassant inspects everything around him, listens to every voice of painful persons, observes every gloomy oozing eyes, gazes at every colour of distress and grabs every scene of grief of common people. He particularly looks at those aspects of the things that are usually ignored.

Specifically, the people who struggle in social classes are generally the common people, the pauper people, the prostitutes, and the people on the fringe. As we see in the writings of Maupassant, that society is the exploitative, biased amalgamation of rich and poor where the writer shows with his keen eyes the conflict between classes, privileged and underprivileged. There is an exploration of morality and ethics in divided society. In the words of Wallace:

> Maupassant achieved a great deal in the realm of art. He made a large imprint upon the politics of society of his time without inspiring a revolution or even directly being the author of a reform. What he did was to examine the platitudes by which his fellow countrymen lived in such a way as to cause others to reconsider them. (Wallace 23)

Maupassant is a very keen observer of society who sees every aspect of social struggle of the individual of different occupation. No other writer of the nineteenth century was extremely aware of the importance of social class in the society of his time, and he constantly expressed the problems, the frustrations, the exploitations, the suppressions, the discrimination and many other different types of inconvenience faced by the suffering common man and the suffering common woman.

Maupassant critiqued and commented on society through his narratives and left his imprint on the fabric of society. The stories analysed above mirror Maupassant's understanding of the French society and minutely analyzing the struggles of social classes. His stories give a panoramic picture of nineteenth century France by highlighting the connection between his style of writing and social struggles.

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