

Biography of Maupassant

Maupassant was the elder of the two children of Gustave and Laure de Maupassant. His mother's claim that he was born at the Château de Miromesnil has been disputed. The couple's second son, Hervé, was born in 1856.

Both parents came of Norman families, the father's of the minor aristocracy, but the marriage was a failure, and the couple separated permanently when Guy was 11 years old. Although the Maupassants were a free-thinking family, Guy received his first education from the church and at age 13 was sent to a small seminary at Yvetot that took both lay and clerical pupils. He felt a decided antipathy for this form of life and deliberately engineered his own expulsion for some trivial offense in 1868. He moved to the lycée at Le Havre and passed his baccalaureate the following year. In the autumn of 1869 he began law studies in Paris, which were interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-German War. Maupassant volunteered, served first as a private in the field, and was later transferred through his father's intervention to the quartermaster corps. His firsthand experience of war was to provide him with the material for some of his finest stories.

Maupassant was demobilized in July 1871 and resumed his law studies in Paris. His father came to his assistance again and obtained a post for him in the Ministry of Marine, which was intended to support him until he qualified as a lawyer. He did not care for the bureaucracy but was not unsuccessful and was several times promoted. His father managed to have him transferred, at his own wish, to the Ministry of Public Instruction in 1879.

Mature Life And Works

As soon as *Boule de suif* was published, Maupassant found himself in demand by newspapers. He left the ministry and spent the next two years writing articles for *Le Gaulois* and the *Gil Blas*. Many of his stories made their first appearance in the latter newspaper. The 10 years from 1880 to 1890 were remarkable for their productivity; he published some 300 short stories, six novels, three travel books, and his only volume of verse.

La Maison Tellier (1881; "The Tellier House"), a book of short stories on various subjects, is typical of Maupassant's achievement as a whole, both in his choice of themes and in his determination to present men and women objectively in the manifold aspects of life. His concern was with *l'humble vérité*—words which he chose as the subtitle to his novel *Une Vie* (1883; *A Woman's Life*). This book, which sympathetically treats its heroine's journey from innocent girlhood through the disillusionment of an unfortunate marriage and ends with her subsequent widowhood, records what Maupassant had observed as a child, the little dramas and daily preoccupations of ordinary people. He presents his characters dispassionately, foregoing any personal moral judgment on them but always noting the word, the gesture, or even the reticence that betrays each one's essential personality, all the while enhancing the effect by describing the physical and social background against which his characters move. Concision, vigour, and the most rigorous economy are the characteristics of his art.

Collections of short stories and novels followed one another in quick succession until illness struck Maupassant down. Two years saw six new books of short stories: *Mademoiselle Fifi* (1883), *Contes de la bécasse* (1883; “Tales of the Goose”), *Clair de lune*, *Les Soeurs Rondoli* (“The Rondoli Sisters”), *Yvette*, and *Miss Harriet* (all 1884). The stories can be divided into groups: those dealing with the Franco-German War, the Norman peasantry, the bureaucracy, life on the banks of the Seine River, the emotional problems of the different social classes, and—somewhat ominously in a late story such as *Le Horla* (1887)—hallucination. Together, the stories present a comprehensive picture of French life from 1870 to 1890.

Maupassant’s most important full-length novels are *Une Vie*, *Bel-Ami* (1885; “Good Friend”), and *Pierre et Jean* (1888). *Bel-Ami* is drawn from the author’s observation of the world of sharp businessmen and cynical journalists in Paris, and it is a scathing satire on a society whose members let nothing stand in the way of their ambition to get rich quick. *Bel-Ami*, the amiable but amoral hero of the novel, has become a standard literary personification of an ambitious opportunist. *Pierre et Jean* is the tale of a man’s tragic jealousy of his half-brother, who is the child of their mother’s adultery.

Maupassant prospered from his best-sellers and maintained an apartment in Paris with an annex for clandestine meetings with women, a house at Étretat, a couple of residences on the Riviera, and several yachts. He began to travel in 1881, visiting French Africa and Italy, and in 1889 he paid his only visit to England. While lunching in a restaurant there as Henry James’s guest, he shocked his host profoundly by pointing to a woman at a neighbouring table and asking James to “get” her for him.

The French critic Paul Léautaud called Maupassant a “complete erotomaniac.” His extraordinary fascination with brothels and prostitution is reflected not only in *Boule de suif* but also in stories such as *La Maison Tellier*. It is significant, however, that as the successful writer became more closely acquainted with women of the nobility there was a change of angle in his fiction: a move from the peasantry to the upper classes, from the brothel to the boudoir. Maupassant’s later books of short stories include *Toine* (1886), *Le Horla* (1887), *Le Rosier de Madame Husson* (1888; “The Rose-Bush of Madame Husson”), and *L’Inutile Beauté* (1890; “The Useless Beauty”). Four more novels also appeared: *Mont-Oriol* (1887), on the financing of a fashionable watering place; *Pierre et Jean*; *Fort comme la mort* (1889; “As Strong as Death”); and *Notre coeur* (1890; “Our Heart”).

Although Maupassant appeared outwardly a sturdy, healthy, athletic man, his letters are full of lamentations about his health, particularly eye trouble and migraine headaches. With the passing of the years he had become more and more sombre. He had begun to travel for pleasure, but what had once been carefree and enjoyable holidays gradually changed, as a result of his mental state, into compulsive, symptomatic wanderings until he felt a constant need to be on the move.

A major family crisis occurred in 1888. Maupassant’s brother was a man of minimal intelligence—today one would call it arrested development—and could work at nothing more demanding than nursery gardening. In 1888 he suddenly became violently psychotic, and he died in an asylum in 1889. Maupassant was reduced to despair by his brother’s death; but though his grief was genuine, it cannot have been unconnected with his own advanced case of syphilis. On January 2, 1892, when he was staying near his mother, he tried to commit suicide by cutting his throat. Doctors were summoned, and his mother agreed reluctantly to his commitment. Two days later he was removed, according to some accounts in a straitjacket, to Dr. Blanche’s nursing home in Paris, where he died one month before his 43rd birthday.

Maupassant's work is thoroughly realistic. His characters inhabit a world of material desires and sensual appetites in which lust, greed, and ambition are the driving forces, and any higher feelings are either absent or doomed to cruel disappointment. The tragic power of many of the stories derives from the fact that Maupassant presents his characters, poor people or rich bourgeois, as the victims of ironic necessity, crushed by a fate that they have dared to defy yet still struggling against it hopelessly.

Because so many of his later stories deal with madness, it has been suggested that Maupassant himself was already mentally disturbed when he wrote them. Yet these stories are perfectly well balanced and are characterized by a clarity of style that betrays no sign of mental disorder. The lucid purity of Maupassant's French and the precision of his imagery are in fact the two features of his work that most account for its success.

By the second half of the 20th century, it was generally recognized that Maupassant's popularity as a short-story writer had declined and that he was more widely read in the English-speaking countries than in France. This does not detract from his genuine achievement—the invention of a new, high-quality, commercial short story, which has something to offer to all classes of readers.

Suicides (TEXT)

Hardly a day goes by without our reading a news item like the following in some newspaper:

"On Wednesday night the people living in No. 40 Rue de-----, were awakened by two successive shots. The explosions seemed to come from the apartment occupied by M. X----. The door was broken in and the man was found bathed in his blood, still holding in one hand the revolver with which he had taken his life.

"M. X---- was fifty-seven years of age, enjoying a comfortable income, and had everything necessary to make him happy. No cause can be found for his action."

What terrible grief, what unknown suffering, hidden despair, secret wounds drive these presumably happy persons to suicide? We search, we imagine tragedies of love, we suspect financial troubles, and, as we never find anything definite, we apply to these deaths the word "mystery."

A letter found on the desk of one of these "suicides without cause," and written during his last night, beside his loaded revolver, has come into our hands. We deem it rather interesting. It reveals none of those great catastrophes which we always expect to find behind these acts of despair; but it shows us the slow succession of the little vexations of life, the disintegration of a lonely existence, whose dreams have disappeared; it gives the reason for these tragic ends, which only nervous and highstrung people can understand.

Here it is:

"It is midnight. When I have finished this letter I shall kill myself. Why? I shall attempt to give the reasons, not for those who may read these lines, but for myself, to kindle my waning courage, to impress upon myself the fatal necessity of this act which can, at best, be only deferred.

"I was brought up by simple-minded parents who were unquestioning believers. And I believed as they did.

"My dream lasted a long time. The last veil has just been torn from my eyes.

"During the last few years a strange change has been taking place within me. All the events of Life, which formerly had to me the glow of a beautiful sunset, are now fading away. The true meaning of things has appeared to me in its brutal reality; and the true reason for love has bred in me disgust even for this poetic sentiment: 'We are the eternal toys of foolish and charming illusions, which are always being renewed.'

"On growing older, I had become partly reconciled to the awful mystery of life, to the uselessness of effort; when the emptiness of everything appeared to me in a new light, this evening, after dinner.

"Formerly, I was happy! Everything pleased me: the passing women, the appearance of the streets, the place where I lived; and I even took an interest in the cut of my clothes. But the repetition of the same sights has had the result of filling my heart with weariness and disgust, just as one would feel were one to go every night to the same theatre.

"For the last thirty years I have been rising at the same hour; and, at the same restaurant, for thirty years, I have been eating at the same hours the same dishes brought me by different waiters.

"I have tried travel. The loneliness which one feels in strange places terrified me. I felt so alone, so small on the earth that I quickly started on my homeward journey.

"But here the unchanging expression of my furniture, which has stood for thirty years in the same place, the smell of my apartments (for, with time, each dwelling takes on a particular odor) each night, these and other things disgust me and make me sick of living thus.

"Everything repeats itself endlessly. The way in which I put my key in the lock, the place where I always find my matches, the first object which meets my eye when I enter the room, make me feel like jumping out of the window and putting an end to those monotonous events from which we can never escape.

"Each day, when I shave, I feel an inordinate desire to cut my throat; and my face, which I see in the little mirror, always the same, with soap on my cheeks, has several times made me weak from sadness.

"Now I even hate to be with people whom I used to meet with pleasure; I know them so well, I can tell just what they are going to say and what I am going to answer. Each brain is like a circus, where the same horse keeps circling around eternally. We must circle round always, around the same ideas, the same joys, the same pleasures, the same habits, the same beliefs, the same sensations of disgust.

"The fog was terrible this evening. It enfolded the boulevard, where the street lights were dimmed and looked like smoking candles. A heavier weight than usual oppressed me. Perhaps my digestion was bad.

"For good digestion is everything in life. It gives the inspiration to the artist, amorous desires to young people, clear ideas to thinkers, the joy of life to everybody, and it also allows one to eat heartily (which is one of the greatest pleasures). A sick stomach induces scepticism unbelief, nightmares and the desire for death. I have often noticed this fact. Perhaps I would not kill myself, if my digestion had been good this evening.

"When I sat down in the arm-chair where I have been sitting every day for thirty years, I glanced around me, and just then I was seized by such a terrible distress that I thought I must go mad.

"I tried to think of what I could do to run away from myself. Every occupation struck me as being worse even than inaction. Then I bethought me of putting my papers in order.

"For a long time I have been thinking of clearing out my drawers; for, for the last thirty years, I have been throwing my letters and bills pell-mell into the same desk, and this confusion has often caused me considerable trouble. But I feel such moral and physical laziness at the sole idea of putting anything in order that I have never had the courage to begin this tedious business.

"I therefore opened my desk, intending to choose among my old papers and destroy the majority of them.

"At first I was bewildered by this array of documents, yellowed by age, then I chose one.

"Oh! if you cherish life, never disturb the burial place of old letters!

"And if, perchance, you should, take the contents by the handful, close your eyes that you may not read a word, so that you may not recognize some forgotten handwriting which may plunge you suddenly into a sea of memories; carry these papers to the fire; and when they are in ashes, crush them to an invisible powder, or otherwise you are lost--just as I have been lost for an hour.

"The first letters which I read did not interest me greatly. They were recent, and came from living men whom I still meet quite often, and whose presence does not move me to any great extent. But all at once one envelope made me start. My name was traced on it in a large, bold handwriting; and suddenly tears came to my eyes. That letter was from my dearest friend, the companion of my youth, the confidant of my hopes; and he appeared before me so clearly, with his pleasant smile and his hand outstretched, that a cold shiver ran down my back. Yes, yes, the dead come back, for I saw him! Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives back life to those who no longer exist.

"With trembling hand and dimmed eyes I reread everything that he told me, and in my poor sobbing heart I felt a wound so painful that I began to groan as a man whose bones are slowly being crushed.

"Then I travelled over my whole life, just as one travels along a river. I recognized people, so long forgotten that I no longer knew their names. Their faces alone lived in me. In my mother's letters I saw again the old servants, the shape of our house and the little insignificant odds and ends which cling to our minds.

"Yes, I suddenly saw again all my mother's old gowns, the different styles which she adopted and the several ways in which she dressed her hair. She haunted me especially in a silk dress, trimmed

with old lace; and I remembered something she said one day when she was wearing this dress. She said: 'Robert, my child, if you do not stand up straight you will be round-shouldered all your life.'

"Then, opening another drawer, I found myself face to face with memories of tender passions: a dancing-pump, a torn handkerchief, even a garter, locks of hair and dried flowers. Then the sweet romances of my life, whose living heroines are now white-haired, plunged me into the deep melancholy of things. Oh, the young brows where blond locks curl, the caress of the hands, the glance which speaks, the hearts which beat, that smile which promises the lips, those lips which promise the embrace! And the first kiss-that endless kiss which makes you close your eyes, which drowns all thought in the immeasurable joy of approaching possession!

"Taking these old pledges of former love in both my hands, I covered them with furious caresses, and in my soul, torn by these memories, I saw them each again at the hour of surrender; and I suffered a torture more cruel than all the tortures invented in all the fables about hell.

"One last letter remained. It was written by me and dictated fifty years ago by my writing teacher. Here it is:

"MY DEAR LITTLE MAMMA:

"I am seven years old to-day. It is the age of reason. I take advantage of it to thank you for having brought me into this world.

"Your little son, who loves you

"ROBERT.'

"It is all over. I had gone back to the beginning, and suddenly I turned my glance on what remained to me of life. I saw hideous and lonely old age, and approaching infirmities, and everything over and gone. And nobody near me!

"My revolver is here, on the table. I am loading it . . . Never reread your old letters!"

And that is how many men come to kill themselves; and we search in vain to discover some great sorrow in their lives.

ANALYSIS of SUICIDES

The theme of the short story, "Suicides", by Guy De Maupassant focuses mostly on depression. But, others see it as madness, hallucination, or obsession. Depression is described as a mental condition characterized by feelings of severe despondency and dejection, typically also with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, often accompanied by lack of energy and disturbance of appetite and sleep. This is exactly what happens to the man in this short story. The man says, "Perhaps I would not kill myself, if my digestion had been good this evening." This indicates that he either has not been eating much, or his stomach hurt. Either way, disturbance of digestion is a sign on depression, whether it's because you've eating too little, too much, or none at all. Towards the beginning of the story, the man says, "Formerly, I was happy! Everything pleased me: the passing women, the appearance of the streets, the place where I lived; and I even took an interest in the cut of my clothes. But the repetition of the same sights has had the result of filling my heart with weariness and disgust, just as one would feel were one to go every night to the same theatre." This quote tells us that the man writing the letter was very tired of his life. He always did the same thing day in and day out, and the boring repetition was just becoming too much for him. Throughout the story, the man talks about how he's been contemplating suicide recently. However, towards the end of the story, the man decides to go through old documents and memories and sentimental things. While he was going through them, he could visualize the events happening in his head, and it brought him to tears. The last memory he went through was a letter from his childhood. When he read it, he said he had "gone back to the beginning", and he realized that he really was old and truly alone. He then committed suicide by putting a bullet in his own head.

Themes of Short Stories by Maupassant

War

War is a very important theme for Maupassant. The writer himself was mobilized from the first year at the university, which he later failed to finish, and participated in the Franco-Prussian war. From this campaign he took out an aversion to any war. Prussian officers who appear in “military” short stories are invaders - limited, cruel, arrogant, disgusting in their arrogance.

The central themes of many of his military short stories are those of heroism and patriotism, but he solves them unconventionally. His characters do not know how to analyze their actions. Feelings that force them to enter the fight and even sacrifice their lives are most often born from the inborn concept of duty and honor, offended by the invaders, or from an instinctive desire to restore justice. Such are the short stories “Boule de Suif”, “Two Friends”, “Uncle Milon”. Different sides of the war and different human characters are also reflected in the short stories “Duel”, “The Adventure of Walter Schnuffs”, “Horror” and others.

Maupassant's attitude towards war is clear: any war is unacceptable to him. The cruelty of the invaders gives rise to retaliatory cruelty, and this terrible vicious circle cannot be broken.

Everyday life

In Maupassant's stories, a peaceful France of the period of the Third Republic appears before the reader as well. Like many contemporaries, Maupassant treated his reality with disgust, sometimes bitter, and ironic, because he saw in it the dominance of pure-minded and selfish interest, destroying natural human feelings. Depicting the daily life of peasants, the writer shows how hard work and hopeless poverty distort human relations (short stories “Devil”, “Le Horla”).

Money

The theme of money is also developed in short stories about bureaucracy. Maupassant knew this environment very well, because he himself had been an official for many years. Sometimes his characters cause deep pity in the story “The Necklace”, the wife of a small official ruined her life in order to pay money for someone else's necklace that she lost, and only after many years she finds out that it was fake. She wanted to look at the ball no worse than others, and for this she sacrificed both herself and her husband.

But more often people are led by greed. The thirst for money leads to the loss of human qualities: for the sake of inheritance, a woman decides to cheat on her husband (“Inheritance”); a husband who finds out after his wife's death about her love affairs is comforted when he realizes that the jewelry presented to her by her lover is genuine and worth a considerable amount (“Jewelry”); the poor woman cripples in the womb her unborn children only to later sell the freaks, but no better is a socialite who, being pregnant, is pulled into a corset to have fun at the balls, and then sends the crippled child out of sight (“Mother Savage”). The theme of money determines the plot of many other of his short stories.