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Literary Analysis Essay: "The Necklace"

It has been said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." And while it is true that each person can find beauty in a variety of characteristics, it also seems that there are societal standards for physical attractiveness. Guy de Maupassant unapologetically approaches this concept of striving to meet societal standards for beauty in his short story "The Necklace." In this story, the reader follows the life of Madame Loisel, a woman focused on high standards of living, and maintaining an appearance of wealth. Madame Loisel gets so caught up in striving to appear wealthy and beautiful, that she eventually loses it all due to dishonesty and miscommunication. Through this tragic story, Guy de Maupassant demonstrates that true beauty does not stem from your physical appearance and possession, but is brought forth through suffering and sacrifice. He supports this theme through the use of word choice, character development and setting.

The first method that the author uses to prove beauty comes from suffering and sacrifice is his word choice. Early on in the story, Madame Loisel attends a ball. In order to be the most beautiful woman there, she uses all of her husband's money to buy a fancy dress and borrows an expensive-looking diamond necklace from her friend. In society's eyes, she captures the essence of beauty. However, the author uses contrasting words to describe her as he states, "She was the prettiest one there, fashionable, gracious, smiling, and wild with joy" (de Maupassant 30). Although initially, this description seems complimentary, the author is actually showing the

reader a negative side to Madame Loisel. He uses a repetition of negative words to contrast her outer beauty with the inner ugliness that she possesses. This is emphasized when he continues to describe her as, “She danced madly, wildly, drunk with pleasure, giving no thought to anything in the triumph of her beauty” (30). By using words such as “madly” and “wildly,” the author is actually saying that Madame Loisel does not truly possess beauty. He continues to show that true beauty is not tied to physical looks by using additional techniques.

The second way that the author shows the meaning of true beauty is through his use of character development. As the story continues, the reader sees a drastic change in Madame Loisel’s character, particularly in her appearance. In the beginning of the story, she is described as “a sensation” (30). When she attends the ball, she receives adoration from numerous men. So much so, that even “the minister took notice of her” (30). However, the reader sees through this outward appearance and understands that, internally, she has very little attractiveness. The author emphasizes how “she grieved incessantly” (28) at the condition of her life and that she was “as unhappy as a woman who has come down in the world” (28). Through these descriptions the author proves that true beauty is not connected to outward appearances. And yet, he has yet to make his final point that true beauty comes through sacrifice and suffering.

Through the use of setting, the author actually makes his most powerful statement about the connection between beauty, suffering and loss. After ten years of hard labor, Mathilde “appeared an old woman now. She became heavy, rough, harsh, like one of the poor” (33). Although Mathilde’s physical appearance seems unattractive, and almost repulsive, she is actually in the most beautiful moment of her life. The narrator states that “Then one Sunday when she had gone for a walk on the Champs Elysees to relax a bit from the week’s labors, she suddenly noticed a woman strolling” (33). At first glance, the reader may not grasp the significance of this

setting. The Champs Elysees is a river in France named after the Elysian Fields – the ancient Greek equivalent to Heaven. Even though her body has worn down, the setting shows the reader that Mathilde is actually in a type of paradise. And this beauty only came through Mathilde's tragic loss and suffering.

In his short story "The Necklace," Guy de Maupassant contrasts society's standards for beauty with a concept that seems to defy logic. Through his use of word choice, characterization and setting, he demonstrates that true beauty develops in a person's life through suffering and loss. As Mathilde Loisel suffers from her tragic error, the reader sees her physical appearance fading, yet in reality, her inner beauty is gaining strength. This leads the reader to question whether societal standards for beauty are all the important. Mathilde's constant striving to meet these standards only ended in her physical demise. And yet, the reader saw that she ended up in a type of paradise by the conclusion of the story. So, should we place so much weight on what society calls beauty? Or should the inner qualities of an individual define their beauty? Guy de Maupassant would ask us to rebel against societal norms and seek to find beauty through a person's character, values, humility and compassion.

Works Cited

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