

Kelli Wood

Professor Wood

July 19, 2015

English 1301

(Un)Making Mathilde:

Description as Character in Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace"

The power of dreams cannot be underestimated. If we can imagine we can do things, there is hope of achieving better and moving beyond our present circumstances. However, when any possibility of achieving those dreams is whisked away, we run the risk of losing hope and falling into the grasp of despair. Guy de Maupassant, in his story "The Necklace," creates a picture of this. It is a picture that illustrates the ways in which possibility or the lack of it can affect who a person is. By using description and the lack of it, Maupassant illustrates the power of poverty and desperation over the not simply the human mind, but also the very depths of a person's personality.

The first part of the story has descriptions of Mathilde's emotions that show how she imagines things on a grand scale. She imagines grand wealth and position that she doesn't have but thinks she should. She feels as if she was "born to have more," and because of this she "suffers." When she visits her wealthy friend, Mme. Forster, and sees all that she has, Mathilde again "suffers" because seeing her friend in all of her luxury makes her weep "all day long." The idea of not having nice things "tormented and insulted her." When she realizes

Always give the author's name and the title, even if it's in the title of your essay.

Treat the title correctly!

Make sure your thesis is at the end of your first paragraph.

Begin your body paragraphs with clear topic sentences. What point are you making in support of your thesis?

Use direct quotes and specific examples to support your point. Integrate them smoothly and use page numbers when your source has them.

she has no jewels to wear with her new dress, she is “utterly miserable.” Each of these descriptions shows how Mathilde sees herself. They are clues to her character and create a picture of a woman who always wants more and is never satisfied with the things she has, even though it’s noted that other women in her position would have been happy with what she had. Mathilde is not those other women; she believes that the life of wealth and finery are meant for her and the descriptions of her emotions create a vision of how much not having that pains her. In fact, she seems to play the role of the martyr, bearing her suffering as if she really was a princess hidden in some poor man’s house: a Cinderella.

The narrator goes on to show us other nuances of Mathilde’s character and paints her as a very dramatic woman who imagines the extremes, the very best and the very worst of things, through his descriptions of her emotions.

There is no middle ground for Mathilde. She is clearly dramatic and has an overactive imagination. She fantasizes about a life of wealth and position—things that are beyond her social standing, and when she has access to those things, it is as if her life is made whole because of those things. She imagined “exquisite pieces of furniture. . . . priceless ornaments . . . perfumed rooms” and “delicate meals, gleaming silver, tapestries . . . delicate food served in marvelous dishes, murmured gallantries.” When she finds the necklace at her friend’s and holds it up to look at it “her heart began to beat covetously. Her hands trembled as she lifted it. She . . . remained in ecstasy at the sight of herself.” When Mme. Forester says she’ll lend Mathilde the diamond necklace, Mathilde “flung herself

Make sure to explain. Tell what the evidence shows in terms of your main point.

on her friend's breast, embraced her frenziedly. . ." At the ball, "she danced madly, ecstatically, drunk with pleasure . . . in triumph of her beauty, in the pride of her success, in a cloud of happiness. . ." Here we see that, while Mathilde is not a woman whose social status allows for those things, she is able to imagine herself in those situations. When she finally has an opportunity to participate for one night in that social scene, she throws herself into it with wild abandon. She feels entitled to these things and life as if she deserves them just for being who she is, and since she's not actually part of that social class, she lives in the country of that imagination.

However, a shift occurs once Mathilde and her husband find the necklace is missing. Based on her reactions to things before, it would seem that she would be described as an emotional mess. She seems the kind of person up to this point who would make a big fuss about losing the necklace, who would sob and cry, but during that whole section of the story there's very little description of her emotions—it's as if they dropped off the face of the Earth. She is "dumbfounded" which would be typical, but she does not respond with emotion. Instead, she sits while her husband goes out to look for the necklace "lacking the strength to get into bed, huddled on a chair, without volition or power of thought." She's described a bit later "in a state of bewilderment." At the end of that scene, the narrator says, "By the end of the week they had lost all hope." This is the breaking point for Mathilde. She knows that the chance she once had to achieve the dreams she's cherished has disappeared. Those dreams are no

longer in her reach even in her imagination. Her imagination is paralyzed by her circumstances, so there is nothing to describe, and no fantasy to indulge in.

As we move toward the end of the story, we see descriptions of Mathilde's physical state, but no longer do we get descriptions of her emotions. As her and her husband are paying off the debt, the narrator describes her as "haggling, insulted," and after the debts are paid off the narrator says "Madame Loisel looked old now." Yet there are no descriptions of her emotions. It's as if she shut down. The only reference to her past life is when she dreams of the day of the ball:

But sometimes, when her husband was at the office, she sat down by the window and she thought of that evening long ago, of that ball, where she had been so beautiful and so admired.

What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace?
Who knows? Who knows?

The Mathilde in the first of the story would have indulged in the glory of that evening over and over. She would have longed for it and relived it as often as she could. However, in this description there is no vision of beauty and glory as we saw in the first of the story. That Mathilde is gone. Here is a woman who does not think of fancy dresses and what she should have, but a woman who only questions things and does not let herself fall into the fantasies of the past.

Through descriptions of Mathilde's emotions, we see her progress from a woman who constantly dreams and fantasizes about more than she can have.

In your conclusion, add it all up. When you put it all together, what does it show?

You may summarize your argument in a sentence or two, but then you should move on to the bigger picture.

If literature represents something about humanity, what does this show about being human in this place, time, way, or circumstance?

Her images of the finest of things, the wealth and the fine company, illustrate her personality and show her as a woman who can see the life of a celebrity, but who is not quite there. As the story progresses and the descriptions of her emotions deteriorate, she is put into a position where even imagining that life is so unfeasible that she no longer is able to conceptualize of it. Like so many people in our world, she has had to live a life of bare existence. Simply to survive she must work from the time she wakes up until the time she goes to bed, and even then, what she has is only enough for basic subsistence. To take the time out of this life and dream of wealth and a celebrated life is not a possibility. If she has a chance to think of her glory days, she does not dream of the dresses, the jewels, or the finery; she only questions "what if?" She has no hope. The breaking point changes not simply her circumstances, but also her very personality. Indeed, her friend says "Oh!—My poor Mathilde, how you are changed." However, Mathilde's change is more than surface, and while her journey through Hell may have redeemed her as a person, getting rid of her vanity and pride, it has left her with no dreams, no imagination, and no hope.

Work Cited

de Maupassant, Guy. "The Necklace." *American Literature*, Accessed 15 Oct. 2017, <https://americanliterature.com/author/guy-de-maupassant/short-story/the-necklace>.

Don't forget to
cite your source!