

MAUPASSANT, GUY DE

Guy de Maupassant: life and works. Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) was born in the Chateau de Miromesnil, near Dieppe, in the province of Seine-Maritime. His parents were prosperous middle class, and his family life stable and comfortable until the divorce of his parents, his mother having taken the unusual step of legal divorce from her husband. The young man's relation to this mother was close, and sponsored his intense interest in reading. (His mother was an avid reader of Shakespeare.) At the age of thirteen, de Maupassant was sent to a nearby seminary for classical studies, but found the religious atmosphere highly unappetizing. (He was much happier with sports like boating and fishing.) In 1868 de Maupassant entered the Lycée Pierre Corneille in Rouen, then from 1868-1871 he moved to Paris, where he worked as a clerk in the Ministère de la Marine. It was at this time that he made the acquaintance of Turgenev and Zola, and of course worked at his writing, which was beginning to be published but had not yet attracted significant attention. In 1880 his most popular work, *Boule de Suif*, (*Tallow Ball*) was published, and would usher in his most productive period of writing, 1880-1891. In those years he turned out several novels, and at least three hundred short stories. Incessant work, plus dissipation began then to ruin his good health, and after 1885 he became obsessed with a fear of death. His mind became more and more unbalanced, and by 1892 he was insane. He died on the Riviera, in 1893, of general paralysis.

Style and theories. Maupassant formulated no artistic theories, in the fashion of Zola, but he worked according to a firm set of principles. He subscribed to Flaubert's realism, without imitating his master's prolixity, his romantic tendencies, or his contempt for anything bourgeois. De Maupassant is the most purely realistic of French writers, not in the sense that he strives to portray the down side of life, like Zola and the Goncourt brothers, but that he maintains an impersonal and scientific distance from his material. In that spirit he totally concurs with Flaubert, about the importance of the mot juste; and his diction is not only precise but concise, natural, sober, and often caustic. Like the works of most of the realists and naturalists, his stories are pessimistic and morbid, and he is inclined to seek out the immoral—if not those depths of social loss which fascinated Zola. He does not seek the bizarre or the sensational; he prides himself on describing and relating only what he himself has witnessed.

A typical plot. *One Life (Une Vie*, 1883) may give us an impression of an aspect of de Maupassant's work. This novel concerns Jeanne, a sensitive and idealistic Norman girl who whose friends crush her by their betrayal. Her husband, Julien, proves to be a faithless mate, having an affair first with Jeanne's maid, Rosalie, and then with Jeanne's close and trusted friend. Jeanne is further disillusioned by discovering that both her father and mother have had extracurricular affairs; and finally Jeanne's son, Paul, shows his lack of affection for her by leaving home to live with a prostitute, on whom he wastes the family fortunes. The title says it all.

An estimate of de Maupassant. Although his field is narrow, within in de Maupassant has never been surpassed. He has the careful artistry which Balzac lacks, and he has to an eminent degree Balzac's ability to render full characters and live social reality.

Reading

Primary source reading

Bel-Ami, tr. Vassiliev, 2012.

Secondary source reading

Gregorio, Laurence, *Maupassant's Fiction and the Darwinian View of Life*, 2005.

Further reading

Donaldson-Evans, M. *Woman's Revenge: The Chronology of Dispossession in Maupassant's Fiction*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

De Maupassant is one of the world masters of the short story. Study one of his stories closely, and examine the narrative strategies he employs there. What are his devices and above all what are his viewpoints?

Have you encountered the French short story before the nineteenth century? Is there any sense in which the short story belongs to the modern period? Was there an equivalent to the short story in older, earlier French literature?

Excerpt

<http://www.online-literature.com/maupassant/bel-ami/1/>

After changing his five-franc piece Georges Duroy left the restaurant. He twisted his mustache in military style and cast a rapid, sweeping glance upon the diners, among whom were three saleswomen, an untidy music-teacher of uncertain age, and two women with their husbands.

When he reached the sidewalk, he paused to consider what route he should take. It was the twenty-eighth of June and he had only three francs in his pocket to last him the remainder of the month. That meant two dinners and no lunches, or two lunches and no dinners, according to choice. As he pondered upon this unpleasant state of affairs, he sauntered down Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, preserving his military air and carriage, and rudely jostled the people upon the streets in order to clear a path for himself. He appeared to be hostile to the passers-by, and even to the houses, the entire city. Tall, well-built, fair, with blue eyes, a curled mustache, hair naturally wavy and parted in the middle, he recalled the hero of the popular romances.

It was one of those sultry, Parisian evenings when not a breath of air is stirring; the sewers exhaled poisonous gases and the restaurants the disagreeable odors of cooking and of kindred smells. Porters in their shirt-sleeves, astride their chairs, smoked their pipes at the carriage gates, and pedestrians strolled leisurely along, hats in hand.

When Georges Duroy reached the boulevard he halted again, undecided as to which road to choose. Finally he turned toward the Madeleine and followed the tide of people.

The large, well-patronized cafes tempted Duroy, but were he to drink only two glasses of beer in an evening, farewell to the meager supper the following night! Yet he said to himself: "I will take a glass at the Americain. By Jove, I am thirsty."