the necklace

by guy de maupassant · Language: EN

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Overview

Guy de Maupassant's "The Necklace" is a poignant short story that delves into the destructive power of vanity, social ambition, and the harsh realities of life. It follows Mathilde Loisel, a beautiful but discontented woman born into a modest family, who yearns for a life of luxury and social prominence. Her constant dissatisfaction with her middle-class existence leads her to resent her circumstances and dream of an opulent world she believes she deserves.

The central conflict arises when Mathilde's husband secures an invitation to a prestigious ball. Determined to make a grand impression, Mathilde insists on a new dress and, more significantly, borrows a dazzling diamond necklace from her wealthy friend, Madame Forestier. The ball is a triumph for Mathilde, who revels in the admiration she receives. However, her fleeting moment of glory turns into a decade of despair when she discovers the necklace is lost. Unable to admit the truth, the Loisels procure a replacement, plunging themselves into crushing debt and a life of extreme poverty to repay it. The story culminates in a devastating ironic twist that underscores the futility of their sacrifice and the deceptive nature of appearances.

"The Necklace" serves as a powerful cautionary tale, exploring themes of social class, the illusion of wealth, and the dire consequences of pride and dishonesty. Maupassant masterfully critiques the superficial values of society and the human tendency to prioritize outward show over genuine contentment, making it a timeless piece of naturalist literature.

Key Takeaways

- Be content with your current circumstances rather than constantly striving for an unattainable ideal.
- Honesty, even in difficult situations, can prevent far greater suffering and long-term consequences.
- Material possessions and outward appearances do not guarantee happiness or true social standing.
- Consider the long-term repercussions of your actions and choices, as they can profoundly shape your future.
- True value is often hidden, and appearances can be deceiving, leading to tragic misunderstandings.
- Avoid the trap of excessive vanity and the desire to impress others at all costs.

Chapter Summaries

Mathilde's Discontent

The story introduces Mathilde Loisel, a woman of great beauty born into a modest family, who feels she is destined for a life of luxury. She constantly laments her humble existence, her plain home, and her simple clothes, dreaming of elegant dinners, rich fabrics, and social admiration. Her husband, a minor clerk, tries to please her but cannot fulfill her extravagant desires, leaving her in a perpetual state of unhappiness and resentment.

The Invitation and the Dress

Monsieur Loisel brings home an invitation to an exclusive ball hosted by the Minister of Public Instruction, hoping to delight Mathilde. Instead, she is distraught, claiming she has nothing suitable to wear. Her husband sacrifices his savings for a hunting rifle to buy her a new dress. Still, Mathilde is unhappy, insisting she needs jewels to complete her ensemble, leading her to borrow a diamond necklace from her wealthy friend, Madame Forestier.

The Ball and the Loss

Adorned in her new dress and the borrowed necklace, Mathilde is a sensation at the ball, captivating everyone with her beauty and charm. She dances with intoxicating joy, feeling truly alive and admired for the first time. However, upon returning home in the early morning, she discovers to her horror that the diamond necklace is no longer around her neck. Panic ensues as she realizes the devastating implications of its loss.

The Search and the Replacement

Monsieur Loisel frantically retraces their steps, searching for the lost necklace, but to no avail. Faced with the impossible task of admitting the loss to Madame Forestier, they decide to replace it. They find an identical necklace in a jeweler's shop, priced at an exorbitant forty thousand francs. With twenty thousand francs inherited from his father, Monsieur Loisel borrows the rest, plunging them into immense debt to purchase the replacement.

A Decade of Toil

The Loisels embark on a grueling decade of poverty and hard labor to repay their debt. They dismiss their maid, move to a smaller apartment, and Mathilde performs all the household chores, her hands coarsened, her beauty faded. Monsieur Loisel works extra jobs, and they endure severe privation, sacrificing every comfort. Mathilde often thinks of the ball, wondering what her life would have been like had she not lost the necklace.

The Ironic Revelation

After ten long years, the debt is finally paid. One day, Mathilde encounters Madame Forestier, who barely recognizes her. Mathilde, now aged and hardened, decides to confess the truth

about the lost necklace and their decade of sacrifice. Madame Forestier, shocked, reveals that the original necklace was merely an imitation, made of paste, and worth at most five hundred francs, rendering the Loisels' immense suffering tragically futile.

Themes

- Vanity and pride
- Social class
- Appearance vs. reality
- Consequences of actions
- Irony of fate
- Materialism's cost

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the necklace about?

"The Necklace" is about Mathilde Loisel, a woman who borrows a diamond necklace for a ball, loses it, and spends ten years in crushing poverty with her husband to replace it. The story explores themes of vanity, social ambition, and the devastating consequences of prioritizing appearances over honesty and contentment.

Is the necklace worth reading?

Yes, "The Necklace" is absolutely worth reading. It's a classic example of naturalism, offering a concise yet powerful critique of societal values and human folly. Its sharp irony and exploration of universal themes like class, materialism, and the consequences of choices make it a thought-provoking and memorable short story.

How does the necklace end?

Spoiler: The story ends with Mathilde Loisel encountering Madame Forestier ten years after replacing the lost necklace. Mathilde confesses the truth about losing the original and their decade of sacrifice. Madame Forestier, shocked, reveals that the original necklace was merely an imitation, worth very little, rendering Mathilde's immense suffering tragically pointless.

Who should read the necklace?

"The Necklace" is ideal for readers interested in classic short stories, naturalism, or cautionary tales. It's often studied in literature classes and appeals to anyone who enjoys stories with strong moral lessons, ironic twists, and critiques of social ambition and materialism.

How long does it take to read the necklace?

"The Necklace" is a very short story, typically taking most readers about 15 to 25 minutes to read. Its brevity makes it an excellent choice for a quick, impactful literary experience.

Best Quotes

“She was one of those pretty and charming girls born, as if by an accident of fate, into a family of clerks.”

This opening line introduces Mathilde Loisel, highlighting her beauty and charm contrasted with her humble birth. It immediately establishes her core conflict: a spirit meant for luxury trapped in a modest existence, setting the stage for her discontent and future choices.

“She suffered ceaselessly, feeling herself born for all the delicacies and all the luxuries.”

This quote reveals Mathilde's deep internal misery and her conviction that she deserves a life of wealth and elegance. It underscores her pervasive dissatisfaction with her middle-class reality, which fuels her desire for social climbing and material possessions.

“She had no rich dresses, no jewels, nothing. And she loved only those things.”

This line emphasizes Mathilde's intense longing for material wealth and status symbols. It explains her constant unhappiness, as her current life lacks the very items she believes are essential for her happiness and self-worth, making her vulnerable to temptation.

“Instead of being delighted, as her husband had hoped, she threw the invitation on the table with disdain, murmuring: 'What do you want me to do with that?”

This shows Mathilde's initial ungrateful and proud reaction to the ball invitation. Her disdain stems from her belief that she lacks suitable attire and jewels, indicating her superficial values and her husband's inability to truly please her despite his efforts.

“It annoys me not to have a single jewel, not a single gem, nothing to put on. I shall look like a pauper. I would almost rather not go at all.”

Mathilde expresses her profound anxiety about appearing poor at the ball. Her fear of social humiliation and her obsession with outward appearances drive her to demand jewelry, setting in motion the chain of events that leads to her downfall.

“Go and see Madame Forestier and ask her to lend you some jewels.”

This is Monsieur Loisel's practical suggestion to his distressed wife. It highlights his accommodating nature and his desire to make her happy, but also inadvertently leads Mathilde to borrow the fateful necklace, initiating their tragic ordeal.

“She danced with intoxication, with passion, intoxicated with pleasure, thinking of nothing, in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success.”

This describes Mathilde's ecstatic experience at the ball, where she finally feels she belongs among the elite. It reveals her temporary escape from reality and her intense gratification from being admired, making the subsequent loss of the necklace even more devastating.

“She uttered a cry. The necklace was no longer around her neck!”

This dramatic moment marks the turning point of the story. Mathilde's sudden realization of the loss shatters her brief happiness and plunges her into despair, signaling the beginning of her long and arduous struggle to repay the debt.

“They had to replace the jewel.”

This simple, declarative sentence underscores the immense pressure and moral obligation the Loisels feel to replace the lost necklace. It signifies their decision to sacrifice everything to maintain their integrity and avoid social disgrace, leading to their financial ruin.

“It cost thirty-six thousand francs.”

This reveals the exorbitant price of the replacement necklace, far exceeding the Loisels' financial means. The staggering sum highlights the magnitude of their sacrifice and the depth of the hole they dig for themselves, emphasizing the tragic consequences of their actions.

“Madame Loisel came to know the horrible life of the needy.”

This quote describes Mathilde's harsh transformation from a discontented middle-class woman to a struggling pauper. It marks her forced encounter with poverty, stripping away her former illusions and forcing her to confront the brutal realities of hard labor and deprivation.

“She had to dismiss her maid; they changed their lodgings; they rented a garret under the roof.”

These details illustrate the immediate and severe consequences of the Loisels' debt. They signify their rapid descent into poverty, forcing them to abandon their modest comforts and adopt a life of extreme frugality and hardship, highlighting their sacrifice.

“She washed the dishes, wearing out her pink nails on the greasy pots and pans.”

This vivid image depicts Mathilde's physical labor and loss of former delicacy. It symbolizes her complete transformation from a woman who yearned for luxury to one performing menial tasks, emphasizing the stark contrast between her past aspirations and her present reality.

“At the end of ten years, they had paid off everything, everything, with the rates of usurer and the accumulations of compound interest.”

This line marks the culmination of the Loisels' decade-long struggle. It highlights their immense perseverance and the crushing burden of their debt, emphasizing the long-term consequences of a single night's vanity and a lost item.

“Madame Loisel looked old now. She had become the strong, hard, and rude woman of poor households.”

This describes Mathilde's profound physical and character transformation after ten years of hardship. Her former beauty and delicate nature are replaced by the harsh realities of poverty, showcasing the irreversible impact of her choices and suffering.

“What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? Who knows? How strange and changeful is life!”

Mathilde's reflective question at the end of her ordeal reveals her contemplation of fate and the pivotal role of the lost necklace. It underscores the story's theme of chance and the profound, unforeseen consequences of seemingly small events.

“Oh, my poor Mathilde! But mine was paste. It was worth at most five hundred francs!”

This is the climactic revelation by Madame Forestier, exposing the tragic irony of the entire story. It reveals that Mathilde's decade of suffering and sacrifice was for a worthless imitation, highlighting the devastating consequences of pride, deception, and misjudgment.

Questions & Answers

What is Mathilde Loisel's main dissatisfaction at the beginning of the story?

At the beginning of the story, Mathilde Loisel is deeply dissatisfied with her modest social standing and financial situation. She believes she was born for a life of luxury, elegance, and wealth, and constantly laments her lack of fine clothes, jewels, and a grand home. This pervasive discontent fuels her desire for a more glamorous existence.

Why does Mathilde initially react negatively to the invitation to the Minister's ball?

Mathilde initially reacts negatively to the invitation because she feels she has nothing suitable to wear. She is distressed by her lack of an elegant gown and, more importantly, her complete absence of jewelry. She fears looking like a pauper among the wealthy attendees, which would humiliate her and prevent her from enjoying the event.

How does Mathilde acquire the necklace she wears to the ball?

After complaining about her lack of jewels, Mathilde's husband suggests she borrow something from her wealthy friend, Madame Forestier. Mathilde visits Madame Forestier, who generously allows her to choose any piece from her collection. Mathilde selects a magnificent diamond necklace that perfectly complements her dress.

Describe Mathilde's experience at the ball.

At the ball, Mathilde experiences a night of unparalleled triumph and joy. Dressed beautifully and adorned with the borrowed necklace, she feels radiant and admired. She dances with

passion and intoxication, captivating many men and receiving compliments. For one glorious evening, she feels like she belongs to the upper class she so desperately yearns for.

What shocking discovery does Mathilde make upon returning home from the ball?

Upon returning home from the ball, Mathilde makes the shocking discovery that the diamond necklace is no longer around her neck. She realizes it must have fallen off somewhere between the ball and their apartment, plunging her and her husband into immediate panic and despair.

How do Mathilde and her husband attempt to find the lost necklace?

Mathilde and her husband undertake a desperate search for the lost necklace. Her husband retraces their steps, searching the streets, contacting the police, placing advertisements, and offering a reward. They meticulously check their clothes and the cab company, but all their efforts prove fruitless.

What decision do the Loisels make after failing to find the original necklace?

After failing to find the original necklace, the Loisels decide they must replace it to avoid disgracing themselves and Madame Forestier. They find an identical diamond necklace in a jewelry shop and, despite its exorbitant price, commit to purchasing it, setting in motion their decade of financial ruin.

How do the Loisels manage to pay for the replacement necklace?

To pay for the replacement necklace, which costs thirty-six thousand francs, the Loisels exhaust their entire inheritance, take out loans from usurers, and borrow money from various lenders. They incur immense debt, which they then spend the next ten years working tirelessly to repay, sacrificing all their comforts.

Describe the changes in Mathilde's life after she and her husband incur the debt.

Mathilde's life undergoes a drastic transformation. She dismisses her maid, moves to a smaller, cheaper apartment, and takes on all the arduous household chores herself. She washes dishes, scrubs floors, haggles with tradesmen, and endures a life of poverty, losing her former delicacy and beauty to hard labor.

How long does it take the Loisels to repay their debt?

It takes the Loisels a grueling ten years to repay their entire debt, including the principal amount, interest from usurers, and compound interest. This decade of relentless toil and sacrifice completely transforms their lives and physical appearances.

How has Mathilde physically and emotionally changed by the end of the ten years?

By the end of ten years, Mathilde is physically unrecognizable. She has aged prematurely, becoming a strong, hard, and coarse woman, with rough hands and a loud voice, typical of poor households. Emotionally, she has become resilient and accustomed to hardship, but also carries

the burden of her past choices.

What is the significance of Mathilde meeting Madame Forestier again after ten years?

Mathilde meeting Madame Forestier again after ten years is significant because it leads to the story's climactic revelation. Mathilde, proud of having repaid her debt, decides to tell Madame Forestier the truth about the lost necklace, setting the stage for the shocking twist that follows.

Spoiler: What is the final revelation about the necklace?

Spoiler: The final revelation is that the original diamond necklace Mathilde borrowed from Madame Forestier was a fake, made of paste. Madame Forestier tells Mathilde that it was worth at most five hundred francs, meaning Mathilde and her husband suffered a decade of poverty and hardship to replace a worthless imitation with a genuine diamond necklace.

What is the central irony of 'The Necklace'?

The central irony of 'The Necklace' lies in the fact that Mathilde Loisel and her husband sacrifice ten years of their lives, endure extreme poverty, and ruin their health to replace a lost diamond necklace that was, in reality, a cheap imitation. Their immense suffering and sacrifice were for naught, based on a false premise of value.

What themes does Guy de Maupassant explore in 'The Necklace'?

Guy de Maupassant explores several themes, including the destructive nature of vanity and pride, the deceptive appearance of wealth, the harsh realities of social class, and the unforeseen consequences of one's choices. The story also touches on the themes of sacrifice, suffering, and the irony of fate.

What does the title 'The Necklace' symbolize in the story?

The title 'The Necklace' symbolizes several things: Mathilde's superficial desires and her longing for a higher social status, the deceptive nature of appearances (as it was a fake), and the crushing burden of debt and sacrifice. It represents both the object of her desire and the instrument of her downfall, a powerful symbol of illusion and reality.

How does Mathilde's husband contribute to her downfall and eventual redemption?

Mathilde's husband contributes to her downfall by indulging her vanity, first by securing the ball invitation and then by suggesting she borrow jewelry. He facilitates the initial mistake. However, he also contributes to her eventual redemption through his unwavering support, tireless work, and immense sacrifice alongside her to repay the debt, demonstrating loyalty and resilience.

What lesson can readers take away from Mathilde's story?

Readers can learn several lessons from Mathilde's story, including the dangers of excessive vanity and materialism, the importance of honesty and contentment with one's circumstances, and the potential for devastating consequences from a single act of pride or deception. It

highlights that true worth is not found in superficial possessions.

How does Maupassant use realism in 'The Necklace'?

Maupassant uses realism by depicting the ordinary lives of middle-class Parisians, their social anxieties, and the harsh economic realities of the time. He details Mathilde's physical deterioration and the grueling nature of poverty, presenting a stark, unromanticized portrayal of the consequences of her actions, grounded in believable human motivations and societal pressures.

What role does social class play in Mathilde's motivations and fate?

Social class plays a pivotal role in Mathilde's motivations and fate. Her perceived low social standing, despite her beauty, fuels her deep dissatisfaction and yearning for luxury. Her desire to appear wealthy at the ball, to transcend her class, directly leads to the loss of the necklace and her subsequent descent into actual poverty, ironically fulfilling her initial fears of being a pauper.