

EN 504: MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

Unit 104

Maupassant: “Madame Tellier’s Establishment”

A Brief Introduction

The Author

Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant was born on August 6, 1850 on the Normandy coast of France, where he spent most of his early life. His parents, who eventually separated, were Gustave de Maupassant, an armature painter and Laure Le Poittevin, a close friend of Gustave Flaubert. He went to school only when he was thirteen years of age. He had his schooling at a Rouen Boarding school and later pursued law at the University of Paris. As a soldier he was enlisted for the 1870 Franco-Prussian War and after the armistice being signed in early 1871, he worked as a clerk in the Naval and Education Ministries. Discontinuing his job in 1880 he became a full time writer and was mentored by Gustave Flaubert. This was the time when Maupassant became familiar with the most brilliant figures of European literature including Emile Zola, Ivan Turgenev, and Alphonse Daudet. In the year 1880, Emile Zola published an anthology of Naturalist writing called *Les Soirées de Médan*, which included “Boule de Suif,” Maupassant’s story about the prostitute who showed patriotic spirit and humane quality during the Franco-Prussian war. The story established Maupassant as one of the leading luminaries of French literature. Incidentally, three weeks after praising Maupassant’s story as a masterpiece, Flaubert passed away. In the decade-long literary life Maupassant published six novels, nearly three hundred short stories, dramas, poetry and travelogues. However, his health has been a problem for him for years as he had contracted syphilis as early as 1870s. After a visit to his mother on New Year’s Day, 1892, he tried to commit suicide by slitting his throat with a paper-knife. He was placed in a sanitarium where he died, after a year and half of prolonged suffering, on July 6, 1893.

Critics often place Maupassant alongside the greats like Tolstoy, Chekhov, Somerset Maugham, and O. Henry. His popularity as an author surprisingly matches his critical acclaim. He might not have the subtlety of Chekhov or the philosophic depth of Tolstoy but he shows equal penchant for offering social criticism and observing human interior. However, a conscious reader is always aware of at least two faces of Maupassant. The first one is a lucid and often ironic observer of the petty vices, false hopes, crude passions, and absurd stupidities of the unremarkable populace of 19th century France. Maupassant's populace included a vast panorama of the French society, from the poor ordinary peasants to the refined upper and middle class urban bourgeois and all are presented with a fine blend of pathos and humour. The satirical tone and eye for the detail of is often all too tangible. This Maupassant is the author of such widely anthologized stories as "Boule de Suif", "Madame Tellier's Establishment", "The Necklace" "A Piece of String", to name only a few. Some of these stories other than being richly realistic, at times also provide a twist at the end that add to their appeal and make the author a close ally of O. Henry. And the other Maupassant, who is receiving much more critical attention in the last few decades, is the witness and perhaps a resident of a sick, tormented schizophrenic haunted world. The frightening psychotic ambience of the stories like "Le Horla" and "Lui" is often identified by the scholars as one actually inhabited by Maupassant who at the height of his syphilic desperation could still create such perfect stories.

The Story

"Madame Tellier's Establishment", the title story of a collection published in 1881 certainly belongs to the first group of stories by Maupassant which focus on the anecdotal and the particular and yet offers a broader vision of social and cultural issues relevant to 19th century France. It has its moments of humour and the satirical notions seem to be well cloaked beneath the humour. As a study of human nature it is no less important. Some of the basic human traits are subtly presented and interrogated through the delineation of a set of apparently ordinary human beings.

The mansion of the title of the story is a house of prostitution at Fecamp and Maupassant's story is an account of the closing of the house on a Saturday so that the proprietor of the place Madame Tellier along with the women who work there can go to a small village to attend the first communion of her niece Constance. The story is divided in four separate sections.

The first one deals with the reactions of the clients of the house who are thoroughly dismayed finding the house closed. The second half is the description of the journey undertaken by Madame and her women, first by a train and then by a horse drawn carriage. The journey by the train involves humorous episodes involving a basket of ducklings and the tricks of a salesman presenting garters to the women. When the horse drawn carriage, driven by Madame Tellier's brother Rivet, moves through the French countryside Maupassant is at his descriptive best as the colour and the splendor of the idyllic landscape complement the moments of innocence enjoyed by the women. The third part of the story deals with the events in the village. When the women reach there the simple folks of the village are awe-struck by the exaggerated decorum and finery of these city ladies. At night while everybody is asleep one of Madame Tellier's girls, Rosa hears the faint cries of Constance. She consoles her and puts her into sleep and is herself consoled and goes to sleep. During the church rituals next morning, these women, including Madame Tellier get sentimental remembering their lost days of childhood innocence and sob profusely. This makes others in the church cry so much that the priest declares the ritual of the communion an instance of miracle. After their dinner, as the whole party of Madame Tellier's girls prepares to leave, a very drunk Rivet tries to flirt with Rosa. In their journey back to the railway station the women sing together the song of the grandmother. In the fourth and final section of the story the women reach the town and are back to their daily business of entertaining their clients. While the visitors are overjoyed to be back at the pleasure house, the women also enjoy these hours of unbridled enjoyment. The story ends with the hint of a marriage proposal for Madame. The evening's service to the customers and most of the drinks are declared free by Madame Tellier because as Madame Tellier says, "We don't have a holiday every day."

Commentary

Brothels and prostitutes had an extraordinary fascination for many of the 19th century French authors. Maupassant had several stories including the brilliant "Boule de Suif," in which brothels and their inhabitants take the centre stage. On the one hand, it allowed the author to bring into light the hypocrisy and double standard of the middle class Bourgeois people. On the other hand, it served the author with an opportunity to interrogate the established moral codes. The central antithetical tension in "Boule de Suif", according to Florence Goyet, contrasts the "classics image of the prostitute-pariah with that of the prostitute-patriot" (*Classic Short Story*,

1870-1925: Theory of a Genre, P. 69). While “Boule de Suif” is absolutely scathing in unveiling the hypocrisy of the bourgeois characters, the present story seems to be more temperate. “Madame Tellier’s Establishment”, from its very first line naturalizes the presence of a brothel in the lives of the refined city people: “They went there every evening about eleven O’clock just as they would go the club”. Maupassant has deliberately juxtaposed the church and the brothel, the house of God and the house of Love. The light that is lit at the entrance of the establishment is compared with one that is put at the “foot of the shrine of some saint, burned all night long”. The old women of the village “cross” themselves when they see the flock of ladies from the town. And the whole episode in the church with its farcical potential successfully problematizes the question of religion and pleasure. Not surprisingly Henry James considered Maupassant a rarity, a “case,” a “lion in the path,” “embarrassing and mystifying for the moralist” (quoted in *Maupassant and the American Short Story*, P. 180).

The women have been presented in broad brush strokes in which everything appears to be colorful and blithe. Harold Bloom has located the charm of this story in these women who are benign and almost loveable.

Everyone in "Madame Tellier's Establishment" is benign and amiable, which is part of the story's authentic charm. Madame Tellier, a respectable Norman peasant, keeps her establishment as one might run an inn or even a boarding school. Her five sex-workers (as some call them now) are vividly, even lovingly described by Maupassant, who emphasizes the peace kept in the house by Madame's talent for conciliation, and her incessant good humor.

(How to Read and Why, P. 43)

Madame seems to be a woman of substance who has almost everything under control. It is she who manages the moment when her brother tries to flirt with Rosa and keeps order at her house after they are back. However, we must not come to the understanding that the goal of the story is the redemption of the prostitutes. That would be great injustice to the ironic vision of the author. The way Madame seems to negotiate, calculate and finally seems to have reached a compromise with Monsieur Vasse is indicative of that ironic glance.

Maupassant had the great Flaubert as his mentor. Not surprisingly his works reveal a sharp eye for the details. Each of the characters, though an example of type, is carefully etched and one can easily visualize them as individual beings. Rosa with her incessant laughter is pretty different from the tall Jew-like Raphaele and none is like the ‘handsome blonde’ Fernande, “a country girl who could not get rid of her freckles”. Even the minor characters like the peasant and his wife in the train are depicted with utmost care. The scenes of the village, the reactions of the village folks, the little girl sobbing as she could not sleep without her mother – all these details add a cinematic quality to the story. His realism in this story however does not prove to be a hindrance in creating the apparently idyllic ambience of the village along with the seemingly harmonious equation between the prostitutes and their customers.

In an oblique way the story also foregrounds the class consciousness of 19th century French society. The story is of course no “The Necklace” in which class issue is at the core. However, the two floors of the establishment and arrangement of the duties in the two floors are indicative of the class difference that is maintained even in a whore house. The eager welcome offered by Rivet’s wife to her city-bred sister-in-law is motivated by a desire to earn some sort of favour for Constance. That also draws our attention to the wide eyed awe of the poor for the rich and the refined, even though we are aware that the reaction is based on something that is essentially hollow. Turning an essential emptiness into something close to sublime is an art and Maupassant has proved his capability once more in writing a perfect short story in “Madame Tellier’s Establishment”. According to Paul Ignotus, the puzzling thing about Maupassant is his “fantastic mixture of greatness and mediocrity”, his skill presenting “the mystery of clarity, the originality of the obvious” (*The Paradox of Maupassant*, p. 11 and 13, 1968). The ‘Establishment’ run by Madame Tellier and the event of a communion in an ordinary village has everything obvious about it; Maupassant has dressed it in the twilight hue of ambiguity.

Bibliography and Suggested Reading

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----- Tajuddin Ahmed