

READER RESPONSE TO SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN GUY DE MAUPASSANT'S THE NECKLACE

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Abstract

This research explores the response to the issue of social injustice represented in the story *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant. The story illustrates the struggles of the lower middle class and the harsh consequences of social demands. Using reader response theory as the main framework, this study aims to examine how various readers understand and interpret the social injustice represented in the story. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to respondents after reading the text. In this research, social injustice is understood as the unequal distribution of power, which results in systemic disadvantages for certain social groups. Social injustice in this short story is analyzed through the lens of class inequality, gender expectations, and social pressure, all of which shape Mathilde's experiences and choices. This research will prove that reader response analysis not only reveals the diversity of interpretations but also emphasizes the importance of literary works as a reflection and a means to question social injustice.

Keywords – Social Injustice, Reader Response, The Necklace, Short Story, Guy de Maupassant

Introduction

Guy de Maupassant, in one of his popular works entitled *The Necklace* (1884), tells the story of Mathilde Loisel, a beautiful woman who feels dissatisfied with her life due to her low social status. One day, her husband gives her an invitation to a fancy party, but Mathilde is embarrassed because she does not have any suitable clothes or jewelry to wear. So she decided to borrow a diamond necklace from her friend, Madame Forestier. Unfortunately, after the party was over, Mathilde realized that the necklace she had borrowed from her friend was missing. Mathilde and her husband worked hard and went into debt for ten years to replace the diamond necklace, until they fell into severe poverty. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the necklace lent by Madame Forestier was only an imitation, highlighting the irony of social ambition and status gaps. The main theme of this short story is social injustice, particularly in relation

to social class comparisons, the gap between appearance and reality, and social pressure to view social status as a measure of success. This story highlights the bitter reality of social injustice and society's expectations of women at that time.

According to Shalini, S. et al. (2017), it is widely acknowledged that literature is a reflection of society. Literature indeed reflects society, its values, and its weaknesses. In its corrective function, literature reflects the weaknesses of society with the aim of making society aware of its mistakes and correcting them. Social injustice has long been a central theme in literature, as many literary works seek to criticize the injustices that exist in society. This short story provides an insightful portrayal of this theme, illustrating how class injustice/inequality and the pursuit of material wealth can cause suffering for those involved.

The author's depiction of social injustice in this short story is quite complex. Mathilde's desire to appear with a higher status at the party shows how her social class limits her, and the effects of her ambition show a deeper and made her suffering in this story. Maupassant's depiction of class-based struggles emphasizes how individuals are often trapped by social expectations and material desires, which ultimately lead to their downfall. This article will discuss how readers respond to the theme of social injustice in *The Necklace*, explore how Maupassant's narrative reveals the widespread impact of class inequality, and how these responses continue to resonate in the modern social context.

Although there have been many studies on “*The Necklace*”, most of them still focus on structural analysis, themes, or characters, as in the articles below:

Handayani and Rahmawati (2023) state that the character of Mathilde Loisel is described as having an inferiority complex, a feeling of inferiority due to the perception of deficiencies in her life. To overcome these feelings, Mathilde makes various complex compensatory efforts to achieve a sense of superiority (success). The conflict reflects the character's efforts to improve her self-image and social status, as well as illustrating the rich psychological.

Syed and Asad (2024) examine that Mathilde was greatly influenced by the pressure to maintain a social/luxurious image. She tried to achieve prestige beyond her means, which ultimately led to her self destruction. The necklace was seen as a symbol of dishonesty or a false image that radiated a luxurious glamour that was actually misleading. The prestige that Mathilde pursued turned out to be nothing more than false luxury. This study compares the

behavior of today's society, which competes through self marketing on social media, with Mathilde's obsession with a luxurious image. This article emphasizes that prestige has a broad impact on individual psychology and social behavior.

Rahman & Khatoon (2022) analyzes the short story *The Necklace* through a structuralist perspective, focusing on the structural elements that shape the narrative. This study aims to examine the application of structuralist principles in literary texts and broaden the understanding of this theory in literary studies. This study finds various structural elements that reflect structuralist theory, such as the opposition between poverty and wealth, happiness and sadness, and appearance and reality. The main character, Mathilde Loisel, is described through the psychological concepts of the id, ego, and superego. In addition, the analysis also covers synchronic and diachronic systems, as well as the use of narrative codes and lexical collocation structures that shape the meaning of the story.

There has not been much research that specifically explores reader response to the issue of social injustice represented in this story. Using the reader response approach, this article attempts to reveal how readers interpret social injustice in “*The Necklace*” based on their respective social backgrounds. This article is expected to contribute to literary studies by combining reader response theory and analysis of social injustice issues. Thus, this research not only broadens our understanding of Guy de Maupassant's work but also provides insight into how modern readers interpret the social messages in this literary work.

Method

The reader response theory, as described by Louise Rosenblatt (1978), emphasizes that the meaning of a text only comes alive when there is interaction between the reader and the text, where the reader's experiences and background play a significant role in their perspective. This approach was chosen because it is relevant to the research objective, which is to understand how readers interpret social injustice in the short story *The Necklace*.

The respondents consisted of 25 people from different backgrounds, such as college students, students, and public. They were selected because they were considered to have the basic ability to read English literary texts and could explain their responses to social injustice in this short story.

The research instruments included the short story *The Necklace* and a questionnaire for respondents. The questions in the questionnaire form were designed with Rosenblatt's concept of reading as transaction in mind, such as asking respondents about Mathilde's attitude in this short story, the moral message they got, and whether social injustice is still relevant in this modern era.

The data collection procedure began by asking respondents to read the short story *The Necklace*. After that, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that guided them to reflect on their emotional experiences while reading, and to relate them to life in the modern era today.

Finding and Discussion

1. Portrayal of social injustice represented in the story

The huge gap in social classes

Mathilde Loisel came from the lower middle class, while those around her, especially her female friend Madame Forestier, came from a higher class. This story illustrates the social inequality in late 19th century Paris. People from the lower classes had difficulty accessing luxury, while the upper classes enjoyed it without burden. The representation of injustice in the short story is that access to symbols of social status such as necklaces and party dresses is only available to the elite, while the lower classes must borrow them temporarily.

Social pressure and norms on women

Mathilde was unhappy because of her low social status and felt pressured by a society that glorified beauty, status, and luxury for women. Social norms at that time dictated that a woman's worth was often measured by their appearance and their husband's social position. The portrayal of injustice in the story is that women from lower classes do not have complete freedom to determine their own lives, they must submit to unequal social standards in order to be seen as equal by others.

Unbalanced consequences

After losing the necklace, Mathilde and her husband had to work hard for 10 years to pay off the debt incurred when replacing it. The social and economic punishment they endured was far greater than the actual offense, which turned out to be merely the loss of a fake necklace. The depiction of social injustice in this story is when the lower class suffers severe economic consequences for one small mistake, while the upper class is relatively unaffected by the same consequences.

2. Reader response to the theme of social injustice in the story

Based on the results of the questionnaire, readers showed a variety of responses to the theme of social injustice represented in the short story *The Necklace*.

Social class and social injustice

In society, there is a reality that social class differences are not only about economics, but also include status and access to opportunities. This difference is known as social class, which is a system that divides society into certain strata, such as upper, middle, and lower classes. Social class differences can be defined as a division of society based on wealth, occupation, education, and power, which then affects the quality of life and opportunities of individuals in various aspects of life. Kraus et al. (2017) stated that when economic inequality deepens on a societal scale, evidence shows that it is society and individuals who suffer. Social class differences exist due to various factors, such as unequal distribution of resources, differences in educational opportunities, and people who maintain social stratification.

In this study, the short story clearly illustrates this reality of inequality through the character of Mathilde Loisel, who comes from the lower middle class but aspires to live like the upper class. This class inequality then raises the theme of social injustice and influences the reader's response, with the majority feeling sympathy for Mathilde while also recognizing the harsh social structures and norms that limit women's movements at that time.

Based on the results of the likert scale questionnaire, the majority of readers

showed strong sympathy for the character Mathilde. From 25 respondents, most of them believe that they sympathized with Mathilde and stated that she was a victim of social injustice, while the others said that they are hesitant. They assessed that Mathilde was a victim of social injustice arising from class differences, social pressure, and gender roles. Maissa et al. (2023) say that Mathilde's desire for luxury goods and the social circle in which they are found arose as a result of the capitalist system she lived in due to her character flaws, causing her to make a foolish request to her friend, Madame Forestier.

The upper class is able to control the lower class through two mechanisms. According to Isaac (1987), the first is direct control through the use of power, meaning that the working class is under the control of capitalists and the products of their labor belong to the capitalists. The second is indirect control over people's minds through the spread of ideology.

From the respondents who agreed with that statement, some of them said that "The necklace symbolizes social injustice within the class system. A woman's worth is always defined by wealth and appearance rather than her true self. The upper class puts too much importance on these things, which makes it clear that the rich are selfish." And others said that "The most obvious social injustice is the gap between social classes. Mathilde feels depressed because of her status as the wife of an ordinary minister, while she longs for a luxurious life like the upper class."

Social background creates social injustice

The social background in which a person is raised greatly influences their access to resources, education, lifestyle, and economy. These factors then shape a person's standards of behavior, appearance, and identity in the eyes of society. Social background plays a major role in shaping their access to resources and determining how they are viewed by society.

In the context of social injustice, factors such as looks and beauty standards are often used as indicators of a person's status and value. Individuals from lower social classes generally have limited access to luxury clothing, body care, or other symbols of prestige such as jewelry, so they are often considered less valuable than upper class groups. The standards created by the dominant class reinforce social distance and create pressure for less privileged groups to "fit in" in order to be accepted.

In the short story *The Necklace*, this condition is reflected through the character Mathilde Loisel, who feels that her appearance does not meet upper-class standards and therefore tries to cover up this shortcoming by borrowing a necklace. This situation shows that social injustice arises not only from economic aspects, but also from social norms regarding appearance and beauty.

Author's critique on social injustice

Based on the questionnaire form, most of the respondents strongly agree that the author's critique on social injustice is evident in this story. Guy de Maupassant delivers sharp criticism of the social injustice that existed in French society at the end of the 19th century. This criticism is clearly evident through

the character of Mathilde Loisel, who is portrayed as a lower-middle-class woman with a desire to live a luxurious life like the upper class. By depicting Mathilde's suffering, Maupassant highlights how social class differences limit a person's movements and create psychological pressure to meet unrealistic standards.

Not only in the late 19th century, this criticism is still relevant to life today. This can be proven from the results of a questionnaire that shows that respondents strongly agree that social injustice still exists today. Some of them say that "Social classes still exist, especially now that we live in an era of luxury that can mostly only be reached by the upper class, including celebrities. Even the term FOMO (fear of missing out) indicates the fear of ordinary people of being left out when consumerism cannot be achieved by anyone outside the upper class." Others said that "This conflict is still relevant because even today, many people are trapped in a consumptive lifestyle, prestige, and social pressure to appear perfect in the eyes of others."

Maupassant also criticizes the gender norms and patriarchal culture of his time. Women, like Mathilde, are judged by their beauty, status, and ability to perform according to social standards. When Mathilde tries to meet these expectations, she becomes trapped in 10 years of suffering due to the loss of a borrowed necklace. In this way, Maupassant shows how an unequal social system and appearance based judgments can destroy a person's life.

This social criticism is further reinforced by the irony at the end of the story. Mathilde worked hard for 10 years to replace a necklace that turned out to be fake. This irony is a satire on a society that values status symbols over human values. Thus, *The Necklace* is not only a story about personal tragedy, but also about unfair social structures, gender norms that burden women, and society's obsession with appearance and social status.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study aims to explore how readers respond to issues of social injustice represented in Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace*. Using Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response theory as the main framework, this study focuses on how readers interpret social inequality, class differences, and find the moral message contained in the story. The results of the study show that readers do not only play the role of passive observers, but also active interpreters who bring their different backgrounds, emotions, and social awareness into the reading process. Through their responses, readers also reaffirm the relevance of the author's criticism of social injustice to the present day.

The results show that most readers were able to identify a significant social gap between the lower middle class represented by Mathilde Loisel and the upper class represented by Madame Forestier. Many readers sympathized with Mathilde's struggles, but at the same time criticized her dissatisfaction and materialistic nature. These responses highlight how *The Necklace* reflects the rigid social hierarchy and gender expectations in late 19th-century Parisian society. Furthermore, readers consider these issues to be relevant in the modern era, particularly in the

context of women's struggle for social mobility and recognition, which is still influenced by social and material pressures.

In relation to Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response theory, the results of this study confirm that meaning is not entirely inherent in the text, but is constructed through interaction between the reader and the text. Each reader's interpretation reflects their personal background, resulting in a variety of equally valid interpretations. This diversity of interpretation demonstrates the power of literature to provoke reflection and dialogue on enduring social issues, such as inequality, gender roles, and economic disparity. Thus, reader response is an important part of understanding how literature continues to play a role in shaping and reflecting social consciousness.

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