



Analysis of Female Characters in Guy de Maupassant's Short Stories

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Abstract: As an important representative of 19th-century French realist literature, Guy de Maupassant created numerous female characters from the lower strata of society in his extensive body of short stories. These women often find themselves trapped in multiple predicaments, including war, poverty, class oppression, and moral discipline, yet they demonstrate resilient vitality and distinct subjectivity in extreme circumstances. Taking *Boule de Suif*, *The Port*, *Madame Baptiste*, and *Old Woman Souvrette* as the main research texts, and in connection with Maupassant's realist creative stance, this paper focuses on analyzing the typological features and spiritual connotations of the female characters he portrayed. The study argues that these women are neither idealized moral symbols nor simply victims; rather, they are concentrated bearers of structural social injustice. Through detailed depiction of individual women's fates, Maupassant transforms the traumas of war, class oppression, and institutional violence into concrete and tangible life experiences, thereby profoundly revealing the long-endured suffering of the common people and reflecting the realist critique and humanitarian concern embedded in his works.

Keywords: Maupassant; short stories; female characters; realism; suffering of the common people

1. Introduction

19th-century French realist literature is renowned for its deep engagement with social reality and truthful portrayal of ordinary people's lives. Within this literary tradition, Guy de Maupassant constructs a vivid and often harsh social panorama through his numerous short stories. Maupassant inherits and develops the progressive ideas of "natural human rights" advocated since the French Revolution. In his literary works, he passionately praises the noble spirit of the people's courageous resistance against foreign enemies during the Franco-Prussian War, while also deeply portraying the real suffering endured by the masses. Under the structure of capitalist society, the survival of the lower-class poor was already difficult, and the fate of the disabled was even more tragic. Maupassant's extensive works concerning these marginalized and oppressed individuals collectively expose their inescapable tragic lives.

In Maupassant's creation, women are neither romanticized ideals nor purely tragic figures. On the contrary, they often come from humble origins and face difficult fates, yet they display remarkable resilience, agency, and emotional intensity under extreme circumstances. Through these female characters, Maupassant presents the suffering of the common people in a concentrated manner, transforming abstract social oppression into concrete and perceptible personal destinies.

This paper takes *Boule de Suif*, *The Port*, *Madame Baptiste*, and *Old Woman Souvrette* as the main texts, focusing on the analysis of the strong and vivid female characters in Maupassant's works, and exploring how these characters serve as key carriers for presenting the suffering of the common people in his realist writing.

2. Maupassant's Realist Stance in Creation

The core of realist literature does not lie in the mere reproduction of reality, but in revealing the social relations and power structures underlying it. Maupassant inherited this tradition, yet he demonstrated a calmer and more restrained narrative posture in his works. He seldom directly judges his characters; instead, he allows social injustice to emerge naturally through the arrangement of situations and the outcomes of actions.

Through a rich quantity of artistically sophisticated short and medium-length stories, Maupassant vividly presents a broad panorama of French society, displaying a strong realist spirit and unique artistic charm. His creation is grounded in familiar social environments, reflecting social realities through typical characters and life fragments, achieving the effect of "seeing the large through the small" and profoundly revealing the features of the era. Works such as *Boule de Suif* concentrate on portraying the class structure and spiritual outlook of French society during the Franco-Prussian War through highly generalized group depictions. In terms of artistic expression, Maupassant's subjects are ordinary yet handled with diverse techniques; his style is natural and subtle, embedding novelty and depth within simplicity. His depictions are exquisite and detailed, adept at portraying character through vivid details, and his language is both standard and expressive. Whether depicting joy or sorrow, his works provoke reflection and possess profound and lasting artistic and intellectual value.

Within this creative stance, women become an important entry point for Maupassant's observation of society. Women often exist within a dual structure of class oppression and gender regulation, and their fates more readily expose the harsh nature of social institutions. Maupassant does not attempt to counter this oppression by portraying idealized female figures. The women in his works are imperfect: some are coarse, some silent, and some even respond to violence with violence. Yet it is precisely this unembellished reality that endows the characters with vivid vitality and gives their fates a stronger sense of realism. In Maupassant's writing, women are not abstract moral symbols but actors situated within concrete social relationships.

3. Analysis of Strong and Vivid Female Character Types

3.1 *Boule de Suif*

The protagonist of *Boule de Suif* is a prostitute of low social status, whose identity immediately marks her as an object of exclusion and contempt. Yet it is precisely in this woman, regarded as "improper," that Maupassant imbues the clearest moral force.

The narrative centers on a carriage allowed to pass under Prussian control. Along the way, the carriage is forcibly detained by a Prussian officer, whose condition for release is that the prostitute, *Boule de Suif*, surrender her body. Motivated by a strong sense of national dignity and patriotism, *Boule de Suif* initially indignantly rejects this vile demand. However, the accompanying wealthy merchants, capitalists, and aristocrats, along with their wives, use moral reasoning and hypocritical persuasion to coerce her into "voluntarily" making the sacrifice. Once the carriage resumes its journey, these so-called "respectable people" respond to *Boule de Suif* with indifference and disdain. At the story's conclusion, as the carriage races to the tune of *La Marseillaise*, the revolutionary song echoes alongside *Boule de Suif*'s cries—it no longer symbolizes national victory, but becomes a profound irony on bourgeois hypocrisy and class cruelty.

Within the confined space of the carriage, *Boule de Suif*'s initial generosity and goodwill sharply contrast with the passengers' indifference. This is most evident in the two occasions when she shares food. First, she shyly but generously invites everyone to share exquisite food enough for her own three days' consumption, yet the previously disdainful passengers devour the basket in greed. Later, the passengers begin to show a superficial "affection" toward her, with Mr. Bird remarking that everyone, as compatriots, should help each other. Here, the ostentatiousness and hypocrisy of the so-called "upper-class" and the kindness, compassion, generosity, and helpfulness of *Boule de Suif* are fully revealed to the reader. However, when leaving the inn, *Boule de Suif* carries no food, while the "upper-class" passengers eat their own supplies indifferently, their earlier enthusiasm completely vanished, leaving *Boule de Suif* both saddened and indignant.

Boule de Suif demonstrates a strong sense of subjectivity. Though her profession is despised by others, it does not prevent her from being a resolute woman, possessing both national integrity and genuine moral virtues. She is politically insightful, a supporter of Bonaparte, and maintains her dignity in the face of the so-called "upper-class" in the carriage, articulating her political opinions sharply. She has ideals and ambitions, echoing across time and space with Tan-chun from *Dream of the Red Chamber*: "If I were a man, I would fight alongside them!" Despite her lowly origins, *Boule de Suif* does not demean herself.

Her coerced surrender of her body for the passage of others is not merely a personal sacrifice, but a choice made under overwhelming social pressure. To persuade her, the others take turns urging her, with even the nuns providing theological justification: "They went on like this; they analyzed God's will, predicted God's decisions, forcing God to care about things that in reality had nothing to do with Him." While *Boule de Suif* reluctantly complies, the others care nothing, even holding a celebration. This fully exposes the disregard of the so-called "powerful" for the dignity of the lower classes.

By contrasting *Boule de Suif*'s virtues with the hypocrisy of the upper-class passengers, Maupassant effectively satirizes and critiques the cruelty and indifference of high society while expressing sympathy and admiration for the lower classes. The work employs a pronounced "small reflects large" artistic effect, making a socially marginalized prostitute the protagonist, fully demonstrating Maupassant's democratic ideals and his distinctive creative perspective.

3.2 *The Port*

The Port tells the story of a family destroyed by an epidemic, leaving a girl bereaved and eventually forced into prostitution. Unexpectedly, one of her clients turns out to be her estranged older brother. The female characters in *The Port* do not experience intense dramatic conflict; their suffering is largely manifested in the repetitive monotony of daily life. Maupassant, through meticulous depiction of the port environment, presents a nearly static state of existence to the reader.

The text provides detailed descriptions of the port: the damp, sticky cobblestone streets, the dark and oppressive street lamps, and the women lining the streets. The women wear "skirts so short they were hardly skirts, more like a loose, puffed

waistband; the soft flesh of their breasts, shoulders, and arms was pink, exposed outside black velvet bodices trimmed with gold, strikingly visible.” In this environment, the prostitutes mostly serve lower-class laborers.

The resilience of these women is not shown through overt rebellion but in their long endurance of loneliness, poverty, and uncertain fates. As the younger sister, Françoise, remarks, “One slowly gets used to it. Doing this work isn’t necessarily worse than doing anything else. Whether a servant or a whore, it’s all lowly work anyway.” Their hardships resemble a long, wet, and cold rainy season—impossible to see through at a glance, yet all the heavier for that reason. Maupassant does not offer them hope of escaping reality; he calmly depicts how they continue to live in silence. After the siblings recognize each other, their immense grief drives them to cling together and weep at the “bed of sin.” Yet once sober, how are they to go on? Where will life guide them next? Everything remains uncertain.

The Port exemplifies a key feature of Maupassant’s realism: his attention extends beyond a single tragic moment to the underlying tone of ordinary life, the persistent suffering that wears down everyday existence. In this story, the female characters become emblematic of the general conditions of survival among the common people.

3.3 Madame Baptiste

In *Madame Baptiste*, the tragedy of women stems from society’s strict regulations on marriage and female roles. Madame Baptiste is not a rebellious figure in the traditional sense; her tragedy arises precisely from her conformity to social norms. Mademoiselle Fontanel was defiled at the age of eleven by the male servant Baptiste, an event that completely altered the course of her life. The cruelty of society lies in its lack of sympathy for her plight, instead treating her as a “filthy, monstrous creature.” She is branded with the shameful label “Madame Baptiste,” a designation not based on fact but imposed by public malice, like a permanent scar. “The little girl grew up bearing the mark of shame, solitary, without companions, scarcely kissed by adults — perhaps they feared that touching her forehead would soil their lips.” While the social system itself is unjust, the individual woman lacks the power to resist, and can only choose numbness and compromise, constantly convincing herself that she lives in a good and just world. To maintain this illusory order, people often shift the responsibility for vicious events onto the victims.

At an awards ceremony, when her husband presented the prize to the second-place winner, the winner, motivated by jealousy, cruelly humiliated Mademoiselle Fontanel. The original text describes: “People shook their heads, chanting the name (Madame Baptiste) again and again, standing on tiptoe to watch the poor woman’s reaction; some husbands even lifted their wives with their arms so they could get a better view; others went around asking: Which one? The one in blue? Children crowed like roosters, laughter rising everywhere.” This vividly exposes the ugliness and shamelessness of human nature. On her way home, Mademoiselle Fontanel jumped into the river and ended her life. Even in death, because it was suicide, the church did not permit her funeral to be open to the public.

The poignancy of the story lies in the fact that, despite having a very happy marriage, a loving husband, Monsieur Arnaud, and even becoming pregnant with her own child (after which gossip about her lessened, as if pregnancy had “pardoned” her), these could not repair the emotional loss and helplessness inflicted by her family in childhood. The public’s mockery became the final straw that crushed her—what she had endured was never erased in society’s view, but turned into a source of ridicule. Through this character, Maupassant exposes the hidden nature of institutional oppression: it does not appear as overt violence, but gradually consumes the individual through everyday life and social norms. Madame Baptiste’s resilience is shown both in her long effort to maintain normal life before her collapse and in her death, which becomes her ultimate act of resistance—a desperate cry of life directed at the public.

3.4 Old Woman Souvarine

Like Old Man Milon, the protagonist of *Old Woman Souvarine* is a hardworking, simple peasant who, during the Franco-Prussian War, harbors hatred toward the Prussians for killing her family and takes revenge against the soldiers, ultimately refusing the enemy’s mercy and dying heroically. The story presents the image of a lower-class mother who has lost her son in the war. Unlike the previous works, this female character enacts her retaliation through violent means. The text describes: “Old Woman Souvarine still stood at the door of the burned house, holding her son’s gun, ready in case anyone tried to escape. After seeing that everything was settled, she threw the weapon into the fire, and then heard an explosion.” Such a valiant and striking female image moves the reader and conveys her national integrity and grief over the loss of her child.

Maupassant does not attempt to justify Old Woman Souvarine’s actions, but by fully presenting her emotional motives, he allows the reader to understand the logic behind this extreme choice. The war not only took her loved ones but also destroyed the emotional foundation that gave her life meaning.

The resoluteness of this character may seem harsh, yet it truthfully portrays the psychological extremes that ordinary people may reach under severe oppression. Maupassant does not shy away from depicting violence; rather, he presents it as

the inevitable outcome of accumulated suffering, simultaneously expressing admiration for such women.

4. Concentrated Representation of Women's Fate and the Suffering of the Common People

As a realist writer, Maupassant followed the principle that literary works should not remain at the level of superficial reality, but should refine and generalize the truth of life to achieve an essential truth. Through the female characters discussed above, Maupassant accomplishes a multi-layered depiction of the suffering of the common people. These women are not isolated individuals; their fates are always closely intertwined with war, poverty, class oppression, and moral regulation.

The prominence of women in Maupassant's work stems from the fact that they often serve as concentrated bearers of social contradictions. The creation of typical female characters not only reflects the trajectory of social development but also deepens the thematic and ideological focus of the work. Their bodies are exploited, their emotions neglected, their dignity sacrificed—all often justified under the guise of being “reasonable” or “necessary.” Through the personal tragedies of women, Maupassant reveals the long-standing existence of structural injustice in society.

At the same time, Maupassant does not offer his characters clear solutions. His realism rejects cheap hope, yet confronts indifference through profound attention. This narrative approach ensures that the suffering of the common people is not reduced to an abstract concept but is presented in the tangible form of lived experience.

Overall, through a series of resolute and vivid female characters, Maupassant constructs the most moving aspect of his realist writing. These women do not appear as triumphant victors, yet they retain agency and emotional dignity amidst suffering. Their existence gives concrete form to the hardships of the common people and elevates Maupassant's works beyond mere social documentation, rendering him a writer with profound humanitarian concern. It is precisely in the portrayal of these women's fates that Maupassant achieves his most powerful critique of the real world.

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