



From Irony to Ethical Redemption: A Counterfactual Reading of G.D. Maupassant's *The Diamond Necklace*

Dr. Toijam Chanu Panthoi

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
S. Kula Women's College,
Nambol Kongkhampat,
Email id: panthoi.toijam@gmail.com

Abstract

Guy de Maupassant's *The Diamond Necklace* is renowned for its ironic ending, in which Mathilde Loisel discovers that the necklace she replaced through ten years of sacrifice and poverty was merely an imitation. The story has traditionally been interpreted as a critique of vanity, social ambition, and the deceptive nature of appearances. This article offers a counterfactual reading of the narrative by imagining an alternative continuation in which Madame Forestier, upon learning the truth, compensates the Loisels for their decade-long suffering. Drawing upon Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism, the study examines how such a hypothetical act would reshape the ethical dimensions of the story. It argues that compensation would transform Madame Forestier from a passive participant in the tragedy into an agent of moral responsibility, while shifting the narrative from tragic irony toward ethical redemption. Through an analysis of accountability, restorative justice, and reconciliation, the article demonstrates that the imagined act of compensation would not erase the Loisels' losses but would provide moral recognition of their suffering. Ultimately, this counterfactual reading reveals how ethical intervention can reconfigure the meaning of Maupassant's classic tale, replacing irreversible tragedy with the possibility of moral repair and human solidarity.

Keywords: Irony, restorative justice, compensation, redemption, moral responsibility

Introduction

Guy de Maupassant's *The Diamond Necklace* remains one of the most widely anthologized short stories in world literature due to its masterful use of irony. The story follows Mathilde Loisel, a middle-class woman who is perpetually dissatisfied with her social position. Maupassant introduces her as a woman who "suffered endlessly, feeling herself born for every

delicacy and luxury." (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 3) Her constant dissatisfaction is further reflected in her belief that she was destined for a more glamorous existence than her modest circumstances allowed. Mathilde's desire for social prestige reaches its climax when she borrows a necklace from Madame Forestier to attend the ministerial ball. At the event, she achieves the recognition she has long desired, as Maupassant writes that she was "prettier than them all, elegant, gracious, smiling, and wild with joy." (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 7) Yet this fleeting moment of triumph becomes the catalyst for a decade of suffering after the necklace is lost.

To replace the necklace, Mathilde and her husband incur a crushing debt. After years of hardship, the story culminates in Madame Forestier's shocking revelation:

"Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, my necklace was paste. It was worth at most five hundred francs!" (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 12)

This statement constitutes the story's central irony, exposing the disproportion between the necklace's actual value and the enormous sacrifices made by the Loisels. While Maupassant ends the narrative at this point, the present study imagines a continuation in which Madame Forestier compensates the Loisels after learning the truth. Such a hypothetical scenario provides an opportunity to explore how themes of justice, friendship, and ethical responsibility might reshape the story's meaning.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Ethical Literary Criticism, developed by Nie Zhenzhao, as its primary theoretical framework. Ethical Literary Criticism views literature as a medium through which ethical dilemmas, moral choices, and human relationships are examined. According to Nie, literary works often reveal the ethical consequences of individual actions and challenge readers to evaluate characters within specific moral contexts (Nie, 2015). Rather than focusing solely on aesthetic or structural elements, ethical criticism investigates questions of responsibility, guilt, justice, and moral agency.

In *The Diamond Necklace*, the loss of the necklace initiates a chain of events that profoundly transforms the lives of Mathilde and Monsieur Loisel. While traditional interpretations emphasize irony and social ambition, an ethical reading invites consideration of moral accountability after the truth is revealed. This article therefore examines a hypothetical continuation of the story in which Madame Forestier recognizes the ethical implications of the Loiseles' suffering and seeks to compensate them. Such a scenario enables an exploration of how ethical responsibility might alter the narrative's meaning and moral outcome.

The Ethical Implications of Madame Forestier's Knowledge

The ethical dilemma becomes more significant when one considers the magnitude of the Loiseles' sacrifice. Immediately after discovering the loss, Mathilde and Monsieur Loisel desperately search for the necklace but fail to recover it. Their decision to replace it plunges them into a life of deprivation. Maupassant writes:

Madame Loisel now knew the horrible life of necessity. However, she did her part, thoroughly, heroically. The ghastly debt had to be repaid. They dismissed the maid; they moved to a garret. (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 10)

The couple's suffering continues for ten years, all because they believe they owe a valuable piece of jewelry. Had Madame Forestier disclosed earlier that the necklace was merely an imitation, this suffering could have been avoided. Although she bears no direct responsibility for the loss, Ethical Literary Criticism encourages readers to consider whether knowledge of another person's undeserved suffering generates a moral obligation to act. Moreover, the final scene reveals that Madame Forestier had remained entirely unaware of the consequences of the loss. Her exclamation, "Oh, my poor Mathilde!" suggests genuine shock and sympathy rather than deception. Nevertheless, once the truth is revealed, an ethical responsibility emerges. Compensation would therefore function not merely as generosity but as a response to a recognized moral debt.

Compensation as Restorative Justice

From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, Madame Forestier's discovery of the truth creates an ethical moment that invites moral reflection. Maupassant emphasizes the Loiseles'

suffering by portraying Mathilde's difficult life after the loss of the necklace. She is forced to perform exhausting household tasks, wash clothes and dishes, carry garbage, fetch water, and purchase household necessities with very limited money. Her poverty is also reflected in her appearance and her constant need to bargain for even the smallest expenses. This dramatic change in her everyday life illustrates the immense personal cost of the necklace and provides a basis for considering the moral consequences of the misunderstanding (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 10).

This marks the beginning of Mathilde's transformation from a dreamer of luxury into a woman shaped by hardship. The suffering endured by the Loisels far exceeds the actual value of the lost necklace. Consequently, when Madame Forestier finally learns the truth, compensation becomes a potential means of restoring moral balance. In this imagined continuation, Madame Forestier recognizes that her friend has paid an extraordinary price for an object that was worth only a fraction of the replacement cost. By offering compensation, she acknowledges the unintended consequences of her silence and assumes ethical responsibility for repairing a fractured human relationship.

Reclaiming Lost Dignity

Mathilde's transformation throughout the story is one of its most significant examples of character development. At the beginning, she dreams of luxurious rooms decorated in an elegant style and imagines herself enjoying refined meals served on beautiful dishes. These fantasies reveal her strong desire for wealth, social status, and material comfort. After ten years of hardship, however, she has changed completely. She now appears older and less cared for, with untidy hair, poorly arranged clothes, and rough, reddened hands. She speaks loudly and spends her days doing physically demanding household work, including washing floors and carrying heavy buckets of water. This transformation shows the profound physical and social impact of the poverty she experiences after losing the necklace (de Maupassant, 2003, p. 10).

The contrast between these two versions of Mathilde underscores the magnitude of her sacrifice. No longer preoccupied with luxury, she has become a survivor shaped by endurance

and responsibility. Compensation from Madame Forestier would not restore her youth or beauty, but it would publicly acknowledge the value of her sacrifices. Such recognition could serve as a form of moral restitution, affirming that her years of suffering were neither invisible nor meaningless.

The Restoration of Friendship

The relationship between Mathilde and Madame Forestier is initially defined by social inequality. Mathilde regards her wealthy friend as a symbol of the life she desires but cannot attain. Indeed, Maupassant notes that visits to Madame Forestier's home left Mathilde "suffering all the anguish of disappointed dreams."

This statement reveals the emotional distance between the two women despite their friendship. The revelation at the story's conclusion exposes the tragic consequences of assumptions and inadequate communication. In a compensatory ending, Madame Forestier's response could transform this unequal relationship into one founded upon empathy and mutual understanding. By acknowledging the suffering endured by the Loisels, she would cease to function merely as a symbol of privilege and instead emerge as an ethical agent capable of compassion and accountability.

From Tragic Irony to Redemptive Closure

The original ending derives its power from the devastating contrast between appearance and reality. Throughout the narrative, Mathilde values external appearances, believing that social recognition brings fulfillment. Yet the necklace itself, the object that symbolizes wealth and prestige, is ultimately revealed to be an imitation.

As Cleanth Brooks argues, irony often depends upon a tension between perception and reality. This tension reaches its peak in the story's concluding revelation. The irony is intensified by the fact that the Loisels have already completed their repayment before discovering the truth. A compensatory ending would alter this thematic structure. Instead of ending with irreversible loss, the narrative would continue toward ethical reconciliation. The lessons concerning vanity would remain intact, but they would be supplemented by a recognition that human beings possess the capacity to acknowledge mistakes and repair damaged relationships.



GYANBODH

An International Multidisciplinary
Peer Reviewed Journal

ISSN:3048-9792

Volume: 3

Issue: 3

May - June: 2026

Conclusion

Viewed through the lens of Ethical Literary Criticism, the hypothetical compensation of the Loiseles by Madame Forestier signifies an ethical awakening that extends beyond the original narrative. While Maupassant's ending highlights the cruel irony of misplaced values and unfortunate circumstances, this counterfactual reading emphasizes the possibility of moral responsibility after the revelation of truth. Compensation cannot restore the Loiseles' lost youth, yet it can acknowledge their suffering and reaffirm the ethical bonds that connect individuals within society. Consequently, the narrative shifts from a story of irreversible tragedy to one of ethical redemption, demonstrating that moral accountability can provide a measure of justice even when the past cannot be undone.

References

- Brooks, C. (1947). *The well wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry*. Harcourt, Brace.
- de Maupassant, G. (2003). *The necklace and other tales* (J. Neugroschel, Trans.). Modern Library.
- Nie, Z. (2015). Towards an ethical literary criticism. *Arcadia*, 50(1), 83–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2015-0006>