

Description of Women in Literature and Arts - French era - 19th Century

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Abstract—The woman Character Mrs. Roland is taken under the topic “Description of Women in Literature and Arts in the Novel *Pierre et Jean* written by Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant who was born on 5 August 1850 at Fécamp, in Normandy, France with his maternal grandparents, but his mother, Laure Le Poittevin, arranged to have her child born in a noble residence in the castle of Miromesnil, has rented.

The female character, who suffered in the hands of her own son Mr. Pierre, is the example for the suffering of a Female, even in the so called advanced country like France. Suffering of women is in itself the horror, added to that the doubting of the fidelity of his own mother by the son, describes and elucidates the pathetic position of women in the Society. The situation is not changed much even in this twenty first century. The condition of Female in the so called modern society has worsened rather than any improvement.

The absence of love and non emotional support from the Husband, the novel goes on, and deals with the exploitation of the relationship beyond the limits of the marriage in which Mrs. Roland tries to find a solace.

The only positive side of the relationship beyond the marriage is the transfer of property to John, who born out of the beyond the marriage relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pierre et Jean (Peter and John) is a novel based on the naturalist or psycho-realist work written by Guy de Maupassant in his native village Étretat in the region of Normandy between June and September 1887. This was Maupassant’s shortest novel. It appeared in three instalments in the *Nouvelle Revue* and then in volume form in 1888, together with the essay “Le Roman” [“The Novel”]. *Pierre et Jean* is a realist work, notably so by the subjects on which it treats, including knowledge of one's heredity (whether one is a legitimate son or a bastard), the bourgeoisie, and the problems arising out of money.

2. THE FAMILY

Pierre and Jean are the sons of Gérôme Roland, a jeweller who has retired to Le Havre from Paris, and his wife Louise Roland. Pierre works as a doctor, and Jean is a lawyer. Mr. Gérôme Roland never bothered about his wife Mrs. Louise Roland, which has resulted in mental agony and deprivation of love by the husband. Mr. Roland is very different from Mrs. Roland. Her husband always thinks of boating and shipping. He does not care of anything related to Family and responsibilities towards it. He does not even care about his wife. Mrs. Roland is always locked up in the Jewellery shop as a prisoner. Her husband always spoke of ships.

Mrs. Roland has two children Pierre and Jean. Pierre, eldest son is a man of thirty years, dark, nervous, intelligent, not very strong in his medical studies. He is full of utopian ideals and philosophical ideas. He has learned a lot, but is finally drawn to medicine. Jean, the younger son with Mr. Maréchal, is a man of twenty-five, blond, tall and gentle. He does the right and gets his degree at the same time that Pierre qualifies as a doctor. From childhood, Mr. and Mrs. Roland love Jean very much. Jean is a model of good behavior, but Pierre gradually becomes impatient to hear the eternal praises of Jean. Parents often compare Pierre and Jean. They force Pierre to imitate Jean.

3. THE STANGER LÉON MARÉCHAL BECOMING A FAMILY FRIEND

Léon Maréchal, who is a stranger, enters into the family of Mrs. and Mr. Roland, in the form of a customer, who visits their Jewellery shop and becomes a family friend. He is a principal clerk in the finance department. He is an incurable Parisian.

He notices the pretty woman, Mrs. Roland, behind the counter. He fell in love with Mrs. Roland and started bringing flowers to Mrs. Roland while she was in the shop. He gets into conversations, became friendlier each time, paying with frequent purchases. He waits for the right time to come in and visits their home and sits down, smile at the wife and shake

the husband's hand. He was a well educated man with a very cultivated mind. He used to talk Pierre about poetry. Once Pierre was suffering from scarlet fever and Maréchal, whom the family did not know very well at that stage, was a great help to them. He used to go to the chemist's to get Pierre's medicine. It was from then on Maréchal became great friend of the family. He used to call Pierre and Jean 'my dear boys', never seemed to prefer one to the other and had them both to dinner. Sometimes Mr. Maréchal offered and lent money to Pierre quite unasked, a few hundred francs, when he was student and which was never repaid.

4. THE CONFLICT

It recounts the story of this middle-class French family whose lives are changed when Léon Maréchal, a deceased family friend, leaves his inheritance to Jean. Just because of a gift received by his own younger brother from Léon Maréchal makes Pierre jealous of his own younger brother, but goes to the extent of doubting his own mother. Further, this provokes Pierre to doubt the fidelity of his mother and the legitimacy of his brother. Pierre discovers that his theories about his brother's illegitimacy are correct when he finds and reads old letters that his mother and Léon Maréchal had been sending to each other.

This investigation sparks violent reactions in Pierre, whose external appearance vis à vis his mother visibly changes. In his anguish, most notably shown during family meals, he tortures her with allusions to the past that he has now uncovered. Meanwhile, Jean's career and love life improves over the course of the novel while Pierre's life gets significantly worse.

This paper tries bringing to the attention of the community at large the sarcastic remarks and the wounds created by the loved ones of a female from her own family despite the fact, that the husband, not bothering anything towards Family and not even a bit of loving for the longing wife. The insult and cruelty shown to her by the family i.e. her own son is a classic example of the suffering of female in not just in the Society but within the four walls of her own family. Thus, the paper through the eyes of the literature of 19th century, high lights the agony of women then as well as now.

5. EXPRESSION OF HATE

The mother, Mrs. Louise Roland having undergone the regrets in life, especially with the husband, shared with deep regret said to his younger son Jean:

“Ah! How I could have been happy in marrying another man!”^[1]

Mrs. Roland calls her husband ugly, stupid and a person who irritates others. She whispers:

“It's so awful for a girl to marry a husband like mine.”^[2]

She tells Jean again that because of her stupid husband she has deceived him and his eldest son is away from her.

The conflict intensifies in the family after Mr. Lecanu, the lawyer, visits the family and announced that Léon Maréchal passes away without direct heirs, he leaves his entire fortune, an income of some twenty thousand francs in 3 per cent debentures, to the younger son Jean whom he saw born and watched grow up and whom he thinks worthy of his legacy with the condition that in the event of non-acceptance on Mr. Jean's part, the money would go to a foundling hospital.

6. TORTURE AT THE HANDS OF SON

Pierre, a man of thirty, is the eldest son of Mr. and Ms. Roland. He is a doctor. He is excitable, intelligent, volatile yet tenacious, full of utopian ideals, and philosophical ideas.

Mr. Pierre begins to suspect his mother. Finally, he has just learned that his mother has done adultery and Jean is the son of Maréchal.

Every time Pierre tortures his mother by commenting on her. Mrs. Roland became ill and very pale. She has a breathing problem. When Mr. Roland tells Pierre, his son to examine his mother, Mrs. Roland, Pierre diagnosis that his mother has a fever and suffering from skin burns. As Pierre writes medicines, bending over his paper, he hears his mother crying, both hands on her face. Mr. Roland is very worried and turns to his son and asks that what problem she has? Pierre replies that this comes from a simple little nervous discomfort that often happens at the age of Mom. Pierre feels a relief in his heart when he sees his mother in this state, which he himself experienced when he learned that John was the son of the Maréchal. Mrs. Roland is now suffering every day from this storm of nerves. Almost every day Pierre provokes these nerves by his bad comments on his mother because he knows the secret of her strange evil. Pierre also suffers greatly. He thinks of forgiving his mother, in her absence, but when he sees her face, he gets angry.

He feels good in his own heart when he sees his mother how much in pain she is because he also felt the same pain when he got to know about his mother's infidelity. The family life becomes unendurable of these continual scenes.

7. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TURBULENCE OF SON

Pierre becomes jealous of his younger brother Jean. Pierre is very distraught. The anger and frustration within himself forces Pierre to share his feelings with others. First, to relieve himself from this situation, he shares this incident with his friend Marowski, a pharmacist who explains him that:

“In a case like this the money is left to the two brothers equally. I tell you, it won't look too good.”^[3]

Also, Pierre shares this incident with bar-maid who seems to be keen on him. She says with a funny smile:

“Well your brother is lucky to have friends like that. It’s not surprising he looks so unlike you, and that’s a fact!”^[4]

Pierre out of frustration, feels like boxing her ears without knowing why, and throws a franc on the table and leaves the bar.

Pierre suddenly recalls what Marowski had said the day before: “That won’t look too good”.^[5]

Pierre always keeps saying to himself: “Why has this Maréchal left all his money to Jean?”^[6]

Pierre starts hating his mother and following thoughts keep ringing in his ears and mind.

“She had been young, with all the poetic linguistics that troubles the hearts of the young. Shut in prison in the shop beside the commonplace husband who always talked shop, she had dreamed of moonlight, travel, kisses in the shades of eventide. And one day a man had come in, as lovers do in books, and he had talked like them”

“She had loved the man. Why not? Because she was his mother! Very well then, why be blind and stupid to the point of refusing to accept the evidence because it was his mother?”

Had she given herself to him? Of course she had, as this man had no other woman in his life. Yes of course, since he had remained faithful to the woman even when she was old and far away; yes of course, since he had left all his fortune to his son-their son!”^[7]

Due, to this Pierre jumps up, trembling with such fury, that he wants to kill someone. His arms outstretched and hand wide open, he wants to hit, bruise, crush, strangle! Who? Everybody, his father, his brother, the dead man, and his mother!

Pierre finds no resemblance of Jean to Mr. Roland. Pierre remembers the portrait of Mr. Léon Maréchal which used to be in his sitting room but now it is disappeared. Pierre starts studying her mother with curiosity and amazement. He thinks that her mother hidden the portrait when she noticed, before anyone else, that this picture resembles her younger son Jean.

One morning before leaving home Pierre asks her mother for the portrait of Léon Maréchal. His mother hesitates for a second or two and replies:

“That portraitlet me see.... I do not quite know. Perhaps it’s in my desk”.

‘Would you mind finding it?’

‘Yes, I’ll look. Why do you want it?’

‘Oh it’s not for me. I thought it would be quite natural to give it to Jean and would give him pleasure.’

‘Yes, you ’are right, that’s a nice thought. I’ll look it out as soon as I’ am up.’^[8]

When Pierre returns home he finds out whether his mother searched Léon Maréchal’s portrait. He asks himself: would she mention it first, or would he have to ask again? It is clear that if she waits again to be asked, she has a secret reason for not showing this picture.

At the dinner time, all of sudden he asks her mother about the portrait. He gets to know through his father that last week her mother took it out of her desk while going through her papers. Mr. Roland adds that with portrait she had lot of letters, half of which she burnt. Pierre understood that her mother lied that very morning.

“Pierre looked at the mother who had told a lie. He looked at her with an exasperated anger of a son deceived, robbed of his sacred love, and also with the jealousy of a man at last discovering a shameful infidelity after long remaining blind. If he had been the husband of this woman he, would have seized her by the wrists, shoulders or hair, and flung her to the ground punched, bruised, and crushed!

The rage that filled him was verging on hatred; it was because he felt she was even more criminally guilty towards him than towards his father.”^[9]

8. THE PICNIC AND THE FIGHT

The family decides to go for a picnic party at Saint-Jouin to celebrate Jean’s inheritance. There Mrs. Roland and Pierre stay alone on the beach. Yet they hesitate to stay together. She was afraid of him, and her son was afraid of her and of himself, afraid of his own cruelty which he could not control. Jean and Mrs. Rosémilly, a widow of 23 with whom Jean wants to marry were also sitting together on the other side of the beach. Mrs. Roland sees them lean over together. Pierre was also watching them. Pierre suddenly laughs. Mrs. Roland asks why he is laughing. While sneering he says:

“I am taking lessons, learning how a man prepares himself to be a cuckold!”. She bursts into anger, shocked by the word he used and furious at what she thought she understood.

“Who do you mean by that?”

“Jean, of course! It makes you laugh to see them together.”^[10]

She murmurs, in a low voice, trembling with emotion:

“Oh! Pierre, you are cruel! This woman is absolutely straight. Your brother could not find anyone better.”^[11]

He laughed outright, with an artificial, staccato laugh:

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Absolutely straight! All women are absolutely straight and all husbands are cuckolds. Ha! Ha! Ha!”^[12]

Without replying, she gets up and hurries down the pebble slope without thinking of falling down and breaking her leg or

her arm towards her other son. After dinner they go to Jean's new apartment which he has bought on rent. There Pierre says to Jean that:

"The Widow looked quite fagged out this evening. Excursions are not very good for her."^[13]

This makes Jean very angry. His face turns red and he starts fighting with his brother. Jean says violently:

"I forbid you ever to say" the Widow "again when you refer to Mrs. Rosémilly."^[14]

During the fight, Pierre reveals the truth of her mother's infidelity to Jean and adds that Jean must not accept the one man's money when he is supposed to be the son of another. Jean stands stock still and asks what he said. Pierre:

"I am saying what everybody is whispering, the rumour that everybody is spreading, namely that you are the son of the man who has left you his fortune. Well, then, a decent fellow does not accept money that dishonours his mother. "Pierre, Pierre, Pierre, how can you think of such a thing? You... is it you uttering such a foul thing? – Yes, yes, it's me. Can't you see, then, it's been killing me with misery for the past month, that I spend sleepless nights and days when I hideaway like a wild animal, that I no longer know what I am saying or doing or what's going to become of me because I'm so wretched, so crazy with shame and grief; for I guessed it first, and now I know."^[15]

Pierre speaks as if no one listening. He forgets that his mother is in the next room. He talks about all the pain he has been suffering for a month. And then he goes out crying:

"What a swine I am to have said that!"^[16]

9. THE UNDERSTANDING AND LOVE OF JEAN FOR MOTHER

"Jean's distress becomes intolerable and he feels that "behind the door was his mother who had heard everything and was waiting. What was she doing? Not a movement, not a shudder, or a breath, or a sigh betrayed the presence of living soul behind that piece of wood. Had she run away? But where? If she had run away she must have jumped out of the window into the street!

A sudden panic possessed him, so quick and so compelling that he smashed in rather than opened the door and fell into the room. It looked empty. It was lit by a single candle on the chest of drawers. Jean rushed to the window, which was shut and the shutters closed. He turned round; searching in the dark corners with alarm, and saw that the bed curtains were drawn. He ran over and opened them."^[17]

His mother was stretched out on the bed with her face buried in the pillow, which she had pulled over her head with her clenched hands so as to hear no more.

"At first he thought she had suffocated herself. Then having taken her by the shoulders, he turned her over but she still clutched the pillow, which hid her face and which she was biting to stop herself from screaming."^[18]

Jean neither reasoned nor argued, he merely laid his two hands on his mother's inert body, and not being able to pull the pillow away, he exclaimed, kissing her dress:

"Mother, darling mother, I know it is not true. Do not cry; I know it is not."^[19]

Mrs Roland gets up with an effort of courage and she says:

"No, it's true, my child."^[20]

And they remain speechless, each in the presence of the other.

For a few moments she suffocates, stretching her throat, spilling her head to breathe, and then runs towards the door. Jean suddenly realizes that if he let her go he will never see her again, and taking her away, he carried her on an armchair, put her down by force, and then says that she would not leave the room. Jean makes his mother understand that he loves her and he will keep her. She murmurs in a heavy voice that this evening he is crying, and tomorrow he would throw her out. But Jean answers with such a great impulse of sincere love: How little she knows him! And then Jean says if she leaves, he will kill himself.

Then Mrs. Roland remained motionless, her cheek against the cheek of her son, feeling the warmth of his skin through his beard, the heat of his flesh. She is overwhelmed by this puerile threat and embraces Jean by caressing him with passionate tenderness. Jean says he loves her more than she believes.

Mrs. Roland places her two hands on Jean's shoulders, and holding him at the length of her arms, says: she has suffered enough in her life, and she regrets nothing, that she loves Léon Maréchal, still dead, she has always loved him, she has loved only him, he has been her whole life, all her joy, all her hope, all her consolation, everything, everything, everything for herself, for so long! If Jean wants her to stay, he has to agree to be his son and talk about him sometimes.

Jean answers in a gentle voice to stay with him. Mrs. Roland throws herself on the heart of Jean; she asks to save her from Pierre. Jean whispers that he will find some solution.

At breakfast, Jean says to Mr. Roland that there is a post of doctor on the Lorraine ship that offers a fixed salary of five thousand francs with accommodation, food, lighting, heating, and service. Pierre, after a little hesitation asks if it is difficult to get a job as a doctor on the transatlantic. Pierre thinks this will be a good way to get away from home and earn a living. Pierre says he will write to his medical school teachers who think very well of him. Pierre leaves without taking coffee because he has to write to his teachers.

10. THE END

On October 1st, the Lorraine ship comes to Saint-Nazaire, enters the port of Le Havre to leave again on October 7 for New York. These days Pierre is very nervous and moved. On October 7, his father, his mother, Jean and Rosémilly came to bid him farewell in his cabin. Pierre looks at his mother who is in a black dress as if she is in mourning. After a while, everyone kisses Pierre but Mrs. Roland looks very pale and turns to her son who kisses her without a word. Pierre shakes hand with Mrs. Rosémilly and asks Jean the date of his marriage. Jean says he does not know yet, but he will do it during one of his trips. And they go out. Mrs. Roland weeps and feels as if her heart is going away with Pierre and her life is over. It also seems like she will never see her eldest child again.

Thus, the character of woman, Mrs. Roland ends in despair and gloom.

REFERENCE

- [1] Maupassant, Guy de., « *Pierre et Jean* », trans.Tancock, Leonard. England : Penguin, 1979, pp.158.
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- [3] Ibid. P 67
- [4] Ibid. P 75-76
- [5] Ibid. P 67
- [6] Ibid. P 92
- [7] Ibid. P 98-99
- [8] Ibid. P 106
- [9] Ibid. P 112-113
- [10] Ibid. P 130
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