“Life…is composed of the most unpredictable, disparate, and contradictory elements,” according to Guy de Maupassant. “It is brutal, inconsequential, and disconnected, full of inexplicable, illogical catastrophes” (“The Writer’s Goal” 897). Utterly to the point with his words, Guy de Maupassant’s fame as a writer stemmed from his “direct and simple way” of telling readers what he observed (Chopin 861). His short story, “The Necklace,” is no exception. “The Necklace” is evidence of the literary realism that dominated literature during the 19th century. Cora Agatucci, a professor of Humanities, states that the subjects of literature during this time period revolved around “everyday events, lives, [and the] relationships of middle/lower class people” (Agatucci 2003). In “The Necklace,” Maupassant describes an unhappy woman, born to a poor family and married to a poor husband, who suffers “ceaselessly” from her lower-class lifestyle, “[…] feeling herself born for all the delicacies and all the luxuries” (Maupassant 524). Through the unfolding of the plot and the exquisite characterization of Mathilde and her husband, Maupassant offers readers a dramatic account of what could happen when a person is not satisfied with her place in life.

Ann Charters defines plot as “the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another as they develop and usually resolve a conflict” (Charters 1003). According to Charters, there are five major parts of a plot. The exposition explains the characters, the time period, and the present situation; the rising action introduces a major complication, with smaller conflicts occurring along the way; the climax, or the dramatic
turning point in the action of the story; the falling action, which helps wrap up the major complication; and finally, the conclusion of the story (Charters 1004-1005).

Plot plays a vital role in “The Necklace,” particularly the exposition. Approximately one page is devoted entirely to Mathilde’s description, a description of both her physical appearance as well as her mentality, giving the readers a crystal clear picture of the main character and the reasons behind her depression. Mathilde “dressed plainly because she could not dress well, but she was as unhappy as though she had really fallen from her proper station,” undoubtedly a station of wealth and prosperity in her mind. Suffering “from the poverty of her dwelling,” Mathilde often dreamt of “silent antechambers hung with Oriental tapestry, lit by tall bronze candelabra” when her own drab furniture and dreary walls angered her to look at them (Maupassant 524). The exposition paints Mathilde as a woman who feels she’s been dealt a poor hand in life, a woman desiring riches far beyond her grasp, which foreshadows the events to come later in the plot.

“The action of the plot is performed by the characters in the story, the people who make something happen or produce an effect” (Charters 1006). Without the characters, the plot would be meaningless because the characters bring the plot to life. Charters also explains that characters can be one of two types: dynamic or static. A static character does not change throughout the story; he or she just stays the same, while a dynamic character is often described as “round” and often changes throughout the course of the story (Charters 1007). The way an author chooses to develop a character affects the entire story, particularly the climax. If a character developed as a calm and level headed
person, he or she will react wisely to conflicts or emotional turning points; however, if a character is developed as greedy and self absorbed, the climax of the story will cause the character to make irrational choices in the face of conflict, as Mathilde, the dynamic main character of “The Necklace” illustrates.

Mathilde’s character is consistently unhappy with her own life and her own possessions, always longing for more than what she has. When her husband brings home the invitation to the ball, hoping his wife will be thrilled at the chance to attend such an exclusive gathering, she instead “threw the invitation on the table with disdain,” because she had nothing to wear. At her husband’s suggestion of wearing her theater dress, she simply cries with grief. When the dress dilemma is resolved, Mathilde is “sad, uneasy, [and] anxious” (Maupassant 525). Her lack of fine jewelry and gems makes her feel that she “should almost rather not go at all” (Maupassant 526). Clearly, Mathilde’s character is one with an insatiable greed for what she does not have.

Later in the story, after the precious necklace has been lost, Mathilde’s character appears to change, taking on the role of a poor woman with “heroism.” As she is forced to scrub dishes, wash laundry, and bargain with their “miserable” money, the reader would assume Mathilde has been humbled by her greed and the price she paid for insisting on wearing the diamond necklace. The reader questions the extent of Mathilde’s transformation when Mathilde sits at her window and ponders the evening of the ball, remembering her beauty and the attention she received.

Contrary to Mathilde is her husband, M. Loisel, a character who remains static throughout the course of “The Necklace.” M. Loisel seems happy with the small things
in life, desiring only please his wife. When he sits down to a supper of soup, he exclaims, “Ah, the good *pot-au-feu!* I don’t know anything better than that” (Maupassant 524). Meanwhile, Mathilde is picturing food she feels she is worthy of, like “the pink flesh of a trout or the wings of a quail” (Maupassant 524). M. Loisel does look his patience once with his wife, saying to her, “How stupid you are!” (Maupassant 526) when she is upset about her lack of jewelry. Other than that small episode, M. Loisel remains fairly consistent throughout the length of the story.

The construction of the plot, such as the dramatic climax when Mathilde realizes she has lost the necklace, combined with the shaping of the two main characters, Mathilde and her husband, force the reader to realize the unspoken theme of the story. Mathilde’s envy of other people’s possessions leads to the eventual demise of her life, while her husband’s contentment with what he has allows him to remain essentially unchanged, illustrates the theme running throughout the story, which is the importance of being satisfied with who you are and what you have, as well as the importance of not wanting or envying what other’s have. This theme becomes obvious when, in the exposition, Mathilde’s perspective on her life makes her seem poor and underprivileged; yet, when the Loisels are forced to make drastic changes in their way of life, such as firing their maid and moving to more economical lodging, the reader realizes the poverty Mathilde suffers from is not poverty at all compared to the life they must lead after they are forced to replace the diamond necklace.

Without a strong plot that envelops the reader in the ongoing action, a story is not as powerful or effective; without good characterization of the main characters, there is no
mechanism for the plot to unfold. If there is not an effective plot with identifiable characters, the theme of any story is lost to the reader, so clearly the three go hand in hand with each other. Maupassant’s ability to communicate facts and descriptions, leaving the emotional interpretation for the reader, is what he’s known for. In fact, this ability makes the reader feel as though Maupassant is telling the story for their ears and hearts only. Kate Chopin eloquently wrote, “I like to cherish the delusion that he has spoken to no one else so directly, so intimately as he does to me” (Chopin 862).

Works Cited

Agatucci, Cora (Professor of English, Humanities Dept., Central Oregon Community College). “Emergence of the Short Story: Literary Romanticism and Realism-Poe and Maupassant.” Handout & In-Class Presentation, English 104: Introduction to Literature-Fiction, Central Oregon Community College [Bend, OR], Fall 2003.


