Boule de Suif

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

In 1893, Guy de Maupassant was born into a middle-class family in northern France. Although comfortable financially, his mother and his father fought often and his parents divorced when Maupassant was 11. His upbringing was primarily shaped by his mother, a highly literary woman who would read him Shakespeare and who arranged a tutor to teach him Latin, math, and grammar. After attending a religious boarding seminary which he detested (enough to purposefully get himself expelled), Maupassant became a student at a specialized secondary school in Rouen. In 1868 he met Gustave Flaubert, who would prove to be a massive literary and life influence. Two years later, he left his studies temporarily to volunteer in the Franco-Prussian war. Maupassant wrote avidly in the '80's and enjoyed commercial success, but by 1890 his health had deteriorated due to the syphilis he had contracted many years earlier. Maupassant died at 43, but he was able to produce over 300 pieces of writing in his lifetime. He is often referred to as the father of the (modern) short story. "Boule de Suif" is one of his earliest published pieces.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The key historical event surrounding "Boule de Suif" is the end of the Franco-Prussian War. From 1870 to 1871, France fought the German states (primarily the kingdom of Prussia) and lost, resulting in a short occupation and the solidifying of Germany as a country. Napoleon Bonaparte III was the French Emperor at the time, and his capture and subsequent death marked the end of the Second Empire of France and the beginning of the Third Republic. Despite suffering a resounding defeat, the Bonaparte name would still remain a symbol of patriotism to many French people in the years immediately following the war. Guy de Maupassant left his studies in Paris to volunteer as a soldier in 1870, and his experience explains the common theme of war in many of his writings.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Closely related to "Boule de Suif" are the works of Émile Zola, particularly his novel *L'Assommoir*. Zola was a friend of Maupassant, and his writing shares many thematic interests with Maupassant, such as a focus on class divisions and the difficulty of upward class mobility. Maupassant's own short story "The Necklace" is also directly linked to "Boule de Suif," because it similarly follows a kind woman with a lower-class position and concludes with an ironic tragedy. And, of course, there is Gustave Flaubert: Maupassant's biggest literary influence (it is common to refer to Maupassant as Flaubert's protégé). Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, set 20 years prior to the action in "Boule de Suif," also takes place in Rouen, Normandy. Although not a critique of the inequity of war and not as firmly condemning of the bourgeois, Flaubert's attention to character detail and his cool, omniscient narrative style can be seen throughout the works of Maupassant.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Boule de Suif (Ball-of-Fat)
- **When Written:** 1880
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1880
- **Literary Period:** Realism, Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story, Naturalism
- **Setting:** A carriage traveling between Rouen and La Havre, and then an inn in Tôtes
- **Climax:** Ball-of-Fat (Miss Elizabeth Rousset) agrees to sleep with a cruel Prussian officer
- **Antagonist:** The Prussian officer and the six well-off travelers in the carriage
- **Point of View:** Omniscient third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Lost in Translation: "Boule de Suif" has been translated into English many times and each version differs slightly, including its title. In English, the story is sometimes called "Butterball," sometimes "Dumpling," and sometimes the more literal "Ball-of-Fat" (or even "Ball-of-Lard").

Big Names: "Boule de Suif" was published in 1880 in a collection of short stories that included other prolific writers at the time, including Émile Zola and Joris-Karl Huysman.

PLOT SUMMARY

As tired French soldiers trudge back from battle, residents of the French town of Rouen anticipate the arrival of the occupying Prussian army. Once those Prussians arrive, the townspeople's fear dissipates—some of them even befriend the Prussian soldiers, while others despise them and even murder occupying soldiers occasionally. There is much animosity in the air—but, still, life has to go on, and eventually people start planning for the future.

Three well-off men (Mr. Carré-Lamadon, Mr. Loiseau, and Count Herbert de Breville) decide one night to leave Rouen

and pursue commercial interests in La Havre, where there is no Prussian occupation. The next day they gather their wives and meet outside a stagecoach, which is ready to take the six of them and four others through Normandy.

The other four passengers include two nuns (who say quiet and mumble prayers most of the ride), one republican (Cornudet), and one prostitute, Miss Rousset. Miss Rousset (also known as "Ball-of-Fat") quickly becomes the object of interest and scorn in the carriage, as the other women make it clear she is not welcome and her presence is an embarrassment. However, hours later when the coach is stuck in snow and nobody has eaten all day, Miss Rousset produces **a basket of food** and wine that has been underneath her skirt. Inevitably, the rest of the carriage changes their attitude towards her and one by one they accept her kind offer of food. Suddenly, everyone is amicable, and the group talks about politics and Prussians for the rest of the journey. Miss Rousset impresses the group with stories of her resistance against the occupying soldiers, and she chastises Cornudet for his republican sympathies and lack of loyalty to Bonaparte.

Still moving much slower than expected, night falls and the group comes upon the town of Tôtes and finds an inn. Here, they are greeted by a terrifying sound: broken French spoken with a heavy German accent. There is a Prussian commander waiting for them, asking them to exit the carriage. While all are traveling with the permission of German officers back in Rouen, the group is still nervous. They share their papers (which have their names and occupations on them) with the commander.

The group enters the inn and sits down for dinner, fairly happy even though everyone is tired. Then the inn-keeper enters with a strange request: the Prussian commander has asked to see Miss Rousset alone. She at first refuses, but the group pressures her into going. "It is for you that I do this," she tells the group. She comes back flustered but mum about what he asked for, and the topic is dropped as everyone eats dinner. There is more discussion about politics, the war, and the bad behavior of the enemy.

The next day, the group finds that the stagecoach has not been prepared for them. No one understands why it would not be ready, so Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and the Count walk into town to find the driver. Along their way, they find French townspeople cohabitating with the Prussian soldiers, and the Prussians doing kind favors for the townspeople. The men are shocked and a little disdainful, but a townsperson explains, essentially, that these soldiers are people too and that the poor—of any country—must look out for one another. The men move on and find their driver, who informs them that the Prussian commander had ordered him not to ready the carriage. No one understands why.

Later that night, Miss Rousset tells the group that the Prussian officer demanded that she sleep with him, and everyone reacts with outrage. The next morning, however, the six wealthy travelers are disgruntled and grow resentful. They are annoyed at Miss Rousset for being the reason that they are stranded (even though it is clearly the fault of the officer). Remembering her lower social status and her profession, the wealthier members of the group come to a mutual, damning conclusion: "Since it is her trade, why should she refuse this one more than another?"(In other words, that she should sleep with the officer, against her principles, so that the group can go free.)

The next day, determined to get Miss Rousset to do what they wish, the wealthier travelers confer with each other and decide that, rather than asking her outright, they will work the topic into conversation over dinner and discuss how, throughout history, sacrifices have been made for the greater good. Even the two nuns (albeit accidentally) add to the pressure by assuring Miss Rousset that, in religious life, an act is judged by its intention. Miss Rousset is solemn and quiet. Later that night, she gives in and does what everyone had hoped: she sleeps with the German officer. The group finds out while she is doing it, and they crassly celebrate their clever plan. The next day, the group leaves.

In her rush to get ready in the morning, Miss Rousset forgets to pack food. The rest of the group all have baskets of provisions, but nobody will even look at Miss Rousset, let alone share their food with her. The three married ladies talk emptily of high society chatter just to specifically exclude the prostitute. Miss Rousset is heart-broken by the hypocrisy of the rest of the group and by the act she had to endure, and she ends the story quietly crying the corner of the carriage headed north.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat) – Miss Rousset, the story's protagonist, is a young woman who works as a prostitute. Her nickname is Ball-of-Fat, due to her robust figure. Passionate and patriotic, Miss Rousset chooses to leave her home in Rouen because she loathes the Prussian occupiers. She leaves the city in a carriage with nine others; among them, Miss Rousset has the lowest class status, and the wealthier travelers (who see her profession as disreputable) are scornful and cruel. Despite this, Miss Rousset behaves kindly—she shares her **food** with them when they're hungry, for example, and she treats them with deference. Maupassant uses Miss Rousset's superior moral character to show that virtue is independent of social class—or perhaps even that virtue is more common among the less fortunate (such as Miss Rousset) than it is among the wealthy. Miss Rousset's virtue, pluck, and independence, however, cannot overcome her vulnerability as a member of the lower class. When the party becomes stranded at an inn, held hostage by a Prussian officer until Miss Rousset agrees to sleep with him, Miss Rousset's companions turn on

her. Out of self-respect and patriotism, Miss Rousset insists that she will not sleep with the officer, but the others in her party—prioritizing their own freedom over her integrity and wellbeing—manipulate Miss Rousset into going through with it for the good of the group. This sacrifice devastates Miss Rousset and, despite her generosity on behalf of the group, her companions once again ostracize her as they leave the inn. Miss Rousset's tragic fate shows the cruelty of class hierarchy. Simply by virtue of their social standing, the other travelers have undeserved power over Miss Rousset, which they use to destroy her for their own gain.

Mr. Loiseau – Mr. Loiseau is a crass, lower-middle class wine merchant from Rouen who is traveling in the carriage to Havre. He sells "bad wine at a good price," and he has two principal interests: making a sale wherever he can, and cracking crude jokes whenever possible. His face is ruddy, and he has big hands and a big belly. Mr. Loiseau and his wife, Mrs. Loiseau, are traveling to Havre for financial reasons: to collect on a huge purchase made by the French Supply Ministry during the war. Mr. Loiseau is the least wealthy out of the group's three married men (Mr. Carré-Lamadon and the Count clearly have more "dignified" upbringings), and this places him in a unique position. He aligns with the other two against the democrat Cornudet, as democracy can be bad for business, but he is the only traveler to repeatedly cross unspoken social boundaries between the "society side" of the carriage and the remaining passengers. He is the only one to accept rum from Cornudet, for example, and he is the first person to eat some of the **provisions** that Miss Rousset offers to share. Despite his total lack of refinement and obvious opportunism, Mr. Loiseau comes across as the least hypocritical in the story because he never tries to act classier than he is.

Mrs. Loiseau – Mrs. Loiseau, one of the travelers in the carriage to Havre, is the sturdy brains behind her husband Mr. Loiseau's sociable lifestyle. She runs the numbers for their wine business and is far more serious than her gregarious, vulgar husband. She does not even like to listen to jokes about money being wasted. Mrs. Loiseau bonds with the other married women in the carriage over their total distaste for the prostitute, Miss Rousset. But, just like her husband, Mrs. Loiseau is lower than Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess in status, which creates some distance between them. Mrs. Loiseau mirrors her husband's brazenness when she voices sentiments that others are thinking but refuse to say. For example, she is the first to suggest that Miss Rousset should not refuse to sleep with the German officer, since that is Miss Rousset's profession. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Loiseau's bluntness isn't redemptive; near the end of the story, she makes a cruel and clearly backwards remark about "some women" (Miss Rousset) preferring a man in uniform no matter what side they are on.

Mr. Carré-Lamadon – Mr. Carré-Lamadon is a rich cotton merchant traveling to Havre in the carriage. With a beautiful young wife, plenty of money, and a few titles, he is perfectly comfortable financially and thus he is a supporter of the status quo. He is a member of the Legion of Honor, but this is an empty label, as he never fought in the war and he favors economic interests over patriotism. Mr. Carré-Lamadon has neither the grand superiority of the Count nor the brash honesty of Mr. Loiseau; like his financial standing, he sits right in the middle. In this way, Mr. Carré-Lamadon is not an antagonist in any scene in "Boule de Suif," but he does go along with the other two married couples in their plan to convince Miss Rousset to sleep with the officer. His ineffectual presence symbolizes the complacency of the middle-class even as others suffer.

Mrs. Carré-Lamadon – Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, a traveler in the carriage to Havre, is the model bourgeois wife—dainty, young, and wrapped in furs. Like her husband, she represents a middle ground between the boorish Mrs. Loiseau and the ethereal Countess. She and her husband are outwardly the ideal French provincial couple; Maupassant suggests that she is consistently unfaithful, though, as she favors young French officers over Mr. Carré-Lamadon. In fact, when the group is stranded in Tôtes, she feels an absurd disappointment that the devious Prussian officer "chose" Miss Rousset instead of her. Despite her own affairs, she judges Miss Rousset harshly just the like the rest of the "high society" travelers and she faints in the carriage out of hunger because she refuses to eat **the food** of a prostitute. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon is as ineffectual as her husband, happy to go along with the rest of the group as they pressure Miss Rousset into giving into the officer.

Count Hubert de Bréville – Count Hubert de Breville is the wealthiest among the travelers in the carriage to Havre. With one of the most "ancient and noble" names in Normandy, this man has been (and will be rich) for the rest of his life. The Count and Countess are a sublime pair—they seem to embody all of the dignity that comes with status. But, like so many things in Maupassant's story, these appearances are only surface-level—the Count and Countess prove to be the most sly, shrewd, and opportunistic out of all of the married couples. The Count's opinions plainly carry the most weight with the group, and he uses this to his advantage in pivotal moments, particularly when he convinces the tenacious Miss Rousset to go against her instincts and beliefs. Whereas Mr. Loiseau is brash but predictable, the Count is outwardly refined but truly cunning on the inside. Maupassant makes it clear that the Count abuses his awesome power and he is the most to blame for the tragic ending of the story.

Countess Hubert de Bréville – Countess Hubert de Breveille, one of the travelers in the carriage to Havre, is the daughter of a small Nantes ship owner, although she married into nobility through her husband, the Count. In her position as Countess, she is regal and sophisticated, nonchalant about status in a way that Mrs. Loiseau and Mrs. Carre-Lamadon cannot afford to be.

The Countess, like her husband, has a lot of sway with the other characters and, like her husband, she uses familiarity and friendliness to get what she wants. The Countess makes Miss Rousset feel welcomed into the group after Miss Rousset shares her **food** in the carriage, and while Miss Rousset thinks that she enjoys an affinity with the Countess, the Countess is only too willing to sacrifice her to the German officer so that the group can be on their way. The Countess's two-faced behavior, in light of her appearance of geniality, makes her a crueler character than either Mrs. Loiseau or Mrs. Carre-Lamadon.

Cornudet – Cornudet, a traveler in the carriage to Havre, is a ruddy, red-bearded French democrat. He is the only single man traveling from Rouen to Havre, and the only politician, openly opposing Napoleonic imperialist rule and excited for the return of a French Republic. Maupassant shows, though, that although Cornudet is supposed to have a revolutionary mindset, he is still opportunistic and selfish like many of the others. He did assist in building defenses around Rouen, but then he retreated into the city as soon as the Prussians came (he never fought). He loves to drink and talk politics, but he has never really sacrificed anything for his country. He neither stands up for Miss Rousset nor shares **food** in the carriage with her once the trip recommences. Ultimately, Cornudet is a narcissistic character, full of hot air.

The German Commander – This unnamed Prussian officer is the story's antagonist, as he holds the French traveling party hostage at an inn in Tôtes until Miss Rousset agrees to sleep with him. He is young, gawky, and off-putting with a "thin mustache" that denotes his incompetence for his position. The officer treats all of the travelers with contempt and, of course, shows outrageous disrespect towards the vulnerable Miss Rousset. Maupassant uses the terrible and casual behavior of this upper-level officer to contrast with the kind-hearted foot soldiers working hard alongside the French townspeople. The commander used the war to benefit personally and economically, conduct which Maupassant shows as inexcusable.

The Two Nuns – The two nuns in "Boule de Suif" are unassuming and demure women of faith who are riding in the carriage from Rouen to Havre. Both women spend much of their time with their heads bent over, praying Hail Mary's and Our Father's into their rosary beads. Still, somehow, they play a huge role in convincing Miss Rousset to sleep with the Prussian officer, as they tell a story from the Bible that the Countess interprets as meaning that Miss Rousset should do as the officer wishes. One might think that two sisters of faith would share **food** with Miss Rousset in the second half of the journey, but they keep their provisions to themselves. Maupassant, who famously rejected religion when he intentionally got expelled from a seminary, consistently shows the nuns either failing to stand up to injustice or actively (if accidentally) furthering injustice, thereby critiquing religious faith.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Follenvie Mr. Follenvie is the heavy-breathing owner of the inn in Tôtes. He always has the unpleasant task of communicating between the travelers and the Prussian officer.

Mrs. Follenvie – Mr. Follenvie's wife, who dines with the travelers on their first night and talks brashly and honestly about the Prussian occupying soldiers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WEALTH AND HYPOCRISY

Set during the Franco-Prussian war, Guy de Maupassant's "Boule de Suif" depicts a group of French travelers who become stranded at a Prussian-occupied inn. Stuck in close quarters in a stressful situation, the group's class tensions come to a boil: they are mostly upper-class couples, except for Boule de Suif (Ball of Fat), a prostitute whose real name is Mademoiselle Elizabeth Rousset. The wealthier members of the party condescend to Miss Rousset and treat her cruelly, only changing their tone when she can be useful to them. Consistently kind yet relentlessly taken advantage of, Miss Rousset is shown to be the only brave, honorable, and generous member of the group. By showing the cruelty and hypocrisy of the wealthy French elite—and the courage and dignity of the poorer Miss Rousset—Maupassant rejects the conventional wisdom of his day that wealth translates to good character.

Even among people of mixed social classes, it is obvious that Miss Rousset, as a prostitute, is at the bottom of the social ladder in the carriage. Because of this, the others treat her with scorn. This is first shown when the three married women quickly take offence to Miss Rousset's presence, uniting in "married dignity…in opposition to [those] sold without shame." As they are all in the same situation—traveling uncomfortably in a small carriage—the only way that they can demonstrate their superiority is to shun and ignore Miss Rousset. At the end, the group uses a similar tactic in which no one will speak to Miss Rousset, even though she has just made a tremendous sacrifice for them. The women sing the praises of their other "high society" friends, which is meant to remind Miss Rousset that, no matter what she has done for these women, she is not one of them.

The wealthy travelers only drop their scorn of Miss Rousset when she is useful to them, which shows their hypocrisy and selfishness. During the carriage ride, the group grows hungry.

When they learn that Miss Rousset is the only passenger with **food**, they accept her offer to share, breaking with their previous attitude. Even so, when Mr. Loiseau says, "[e]verything goes in time of war, does it not, Madame?" he is explicitly remarking on how the wealthier travelers would not normally be speaking to a prostitute, and it's only the extreme circumstances—their unusual desperation for food—that change their behavior.

Similarly, when the group arrives in Tôtes and the inn owner announces that the German officer in charge would like to speak to Miss Rousset, the wealthier travelers have no problem asking her to put herself in a potentially dangerous situation. The group had been kinder since she'd shared her food, but, as soon as their well-being is threatened, they have no issue with "asking, begging, beseeching her to go," since they "feared the complications that might result from disobedience." This dynamic recurs when the wealthier travelers come together and convince Miss Rousset to sleep with the German soldier so that he will let them all leave. Despite thinking and saying cruel things behind her back, the group bands together and pretends to reason kindly with Miss Rousset to manipulate her into going against her own moral code. Even though Miss Rousset sacrifices her morals and dignity for the group, they turn on her afterwards, which is the story's clearest demonstration of their cruelty and selfishness. As they journey home, they realize that everybody has brought provisions except Miss Rousset, but nobody offers to share with her, even though her sacrifice is what freed them.

Despite that Miss Rousset is considered the least respectable member of the group, Maupassant depicts her as the story's most generous, kind, and dignified character. Miss Rousset can feel the coldness coming from her wealthier companions, but she still offers to share her food in the beginning of the trip. She says, "Goodness…if I dared to offer anything to these gentlemen and ladies I would," which is a polite way of acknowledging her lesser social status while still offering to be kind. Additionally, when she is propositioned by the democrat Cornudet on their first night in the inn, Miss Rousset rejects his advance because she can't imagine sleeping with somebody when an enemy Prussian officer is in the room next door—she'd consider it shameful. Although later she is tragically convinced to sleep with that very officer, Maupassant is showing that she is firm and patriotic, and even the egotistical Cornudet understands this and leaves her be. Finally, when the group leaves Tôtes and hypocritically refuses to share their food, Miss Rousset is devastated but tries not to show it. She ends the story crying quietly, "mak[ing] terrible efforts to prevent it." In the face of the wealthier travelers' disgust, she tries to maintain her dignity.

Miss Rousset tries, over and over, to act honorably, even though she is the butt of relentless cruelty and has the lowest status of the group. The others not only ignore her virtue but take advantage of it every chance they get. Maupassant, in this way, sidesteps the ideology of 19th-century French society and refuses to depict dignity as being tied to wealth or class. His conclusion is that the exploitative and selfish upper-classes lack, by nature, any claim to virtue, whereas dignity, honor, and kindness are more often found among the poor.

CLASS DIVISION IN WARTIME

Guy de Maupassant was a patriot; he fought in the Franco-Prussian war and, in "Boule de Suif," he extends the most sympathy towards characters who have strong patriotic beliefs. Still, this short story is in no way a celebration of war. Set in 1880 as the war is ending, with the Prussians victorious, "Boule de Suif" demonstrates how the gaping class divides within an army make the concept of "victory" empty, since the poor foot soldiers on both sides suffer greatly and gain nothing, even if they ostensibly win. Maupassant's most evident takeaway concerning war, likely inspired by his own experience, is that soldiers on both sides of a conflict have more in common with each other than with their wealthier leaders. In wartime, no matter who is victorious, it will always be the poor who suffer the most.

Maupassant's depiction of the Prussian general shows how the wealthier officers (as opposed to the poorer soldiers) are cruelly exploiting war for their own gain. When the carriage first encounters the arrogant commander, he is described as having "an enormous mustache of long straight hairs…seem[ing] to weigh heavily on the corners of his mouth." Since Maupassant had earlier mocked the French generals for being chosen as officers "on account of the length of their mustaches," it is clear that this description is meant to signal that the Prussian officer (like the French generals) is decadent and unqualified for his position. Maupassant underscores this when the three wealthy men from the carriage confront the officer and ask him why he won't allow them to leave Tôtes. The officer receives them "stretched out in an armchair, his feet on the mantelpiece…enveloped in a flamboyant dressing gown." This image of an officer during wartime is striking: he is idle, disrespectful, and luxuriating while his troops are suffering tremendous violence. The French already see the Prussians as insolent invaders, and this general is confirming their beliefs. Finally, Maupassant shows the dynamic of wealthy officers exploiting the poor in wartime through the officer's demand that Miss Rousset—the poorest and most vulnerable among the travelers—sleep with him. Since he refuses to free the other travelers until she does, it's clear that this upper-level military commander is abusing his power and profiting from war in a totally inappropriate way.

However, Maupassant makes it clear that there is another side to the Prussians: unlike the cruel, exploitative general, the poorer foot soldiers act kindly towards the French townspeople. Despite their perception that the Prussians are

an awful enemy, a group from the carriage come across soldiers in Tôtes being extremely helpful to the working-class French people with whom they're supposedly at war. They see soldiers "paring potatoes…cleaning the hairdresser's shop…even washing the linen of…an impotent old grandmother." None of these images line up with the stereotype of a cruel and lazy enemy. In fact, when the richest traveler questions a poorer townsperson about what is going on, the French townsman replies "those men are not wicked; they are not the Prussians we hear about…they have left wives and children…it is not amusing to them, this war…they work [here] as if they were in their own homes." By showing the kindness and sacrifice of these soldiers, Maupassant contrasts the cavalier, disgusting behavior of the privileged German commander with the hardworking and solemn attitude of the poorer Prussian soldiers.

This dynamic of the poor suffering disproportionately while the wealthy profit does not only exist on the Prussian side; it's true for the French, as well. For example, the poorer Miss Rousset left Rouen for very different reasons than her wealthier traveling companions. Her house was stocked with food and she could have stayed, but she felt so patriotic that looking at the Prussians made her "blood boil with anger." Her choice to leave her life behind was, in other words, a sacrifice made for moral reasons. By contrast, the wealthier travelers talk vainly about the "havoc" the war had caused on their businesses and the "losses" they suffered. They are leaving because they think there are better commercial opportunities in La Havre, which shows the wealthy finding ways to profit in wartime. In terms of the French army, Maupassant opens "Boule de Suif" by describing the "long and filthy" beards of the French army men—with their "uniforms in tatters," their bodies "worn-out and back-broken." This physical suffering parallels the grief of the Prussian foot soldiers in Tôtes, who have left their families and "weep for their homes." This demonstrates how there is shared pain among the poorer members of both countries in times of war. In the army, as in the carriage, the wealthy have only selfish concerns while the more moral poor suffer physically and mentally.

War is complicated and horrible, but Maupassant wants to make it clear that it is far worse for some than it is for others. The Prussian and French foot soldiers leave behind their lives to wear ragged clothes, bear the brunt of the fighting, and serve lazy, selfish generals—all without the promise of any personal gain. Meanwhile, the French and Prussian officers are underqualified for their jobs, spared the worst of the fighting, and they personally benefit from the luxuries that their roles afford. From this, it's clear that the main division in the story is not one of nationality, but of class. The poor French and Prussian foot soldiers, in other words, are collectively the victims of a war fought for the benefit of the wealthy.

GENDER, POWER, AND SACRIFICE

"Boule de Suif" is fundamentally a story about power, and the women Maupassant depicts enjoy very little of it. Six of the story's ten French travelers are women: two nuns, three married ladies, and a single prostitute—Miss Rousset, or "Ball-of-Fat." All of these characters suffer for being female, although they suffer differently based on their class background. Miss Rousset, who is poor, disreputable, and unmarried initially has more autonomy than the married women around her because she has no husband to control her life. However, being unmarried also makes her vulnerable; the group targets her, first with their scorn and then with their demand that she sacrifice herself by sleeping with the Prussian officer—both of which would be unimaginable were she traveling with a husband. By showing men manipulating and exploiting Miss Rousset—and by showing the wealthier women around her aligning with the men—Maupassant suggests that male power damages women twofold: by subjecting them to manipulation and violence, and by undermining the possibility of female solidarity.

The initial carriage ride depicts Miss Rousset as having more autonomy than the married women around her, since she has no man to control her. The three married women in this story are literally "installed" into the carriages by their husbands. They have no say as to whether or not they leave their homes in Rouen—instead, they are uprooting their lives because their husbands decided that they should. By contrast, Miss Rousset herself has chosen to leave, and she explains this choice to others, showing that she is independent in her actions and thoughts. That the married women do not weigh in suggests that their opinions about the move don't matter. In addition to being more autonomous than the married women, Miss Rousset seems to have more power than the two other single women in the carriage, who are nuns. These women have given their lives to religion (and to a church hierarchy controlled by men). One is "pitted with smallpox" while the other has "a disease of the lungs," descriptions that make them "appear like martyrs" for their religion. Maupassant does not develop the characters of these women beyond their martyrdom, which draws out Miss Rousset's vivacity and self-sufficiency by contrast. Perhaps most important, when Miss Rousset produces **a basket of food** that everyone eventually shares, she experiences a brief moment of unusual power, as the whole group—even the wealthier men—are dependent on her.

While Miss Rousset initially appears to be the most powerful woman in the party, her unmarried status eventually makes her vulnerable to predatory men. When the slimy German officer demands that Miss Rousset sleep with him, he is not seeing her as an autonomous businesswoman: he sees her as a lowly prostitute, a woman without a man to defend her. He does not care that she despises him, demonstrating how he places no importance on her desires or opinions. The Count—a member

of her own traveling party—degrades Miss Rousset in a similar, albeit subtler, way. He consistently reminds Miss Rousset of her "place," bending her to his will by emphasizing how little power she actually has compared to the men around her. When she at first refuses to even meet with the Prussian officer, the Count says "[i]t is never worth while to resist those in power." He is referring to the officer, but he also means himself. This foreshadows when, towards the end of the story, the Count is the critical voice pressuring Miss Rousset to sleep with the officer for the benefit of the group.

As the men exploit and manipulate Miss Rousset, the other women never stick up for her; in fact, they support the men. Mrs. Loiseau, for example, tries to justify the situation by saying that the Prussian officer "respects married women." This implies that Miss Rousset, as a single woman, has no right to her own body. Implicitly, Mrs. Loiseau wants to believe that her marriage protects her from male violation, so it's not in her interest to stick up for Miss Rousset. In addition, Mrs. Loiseau says of the officer that "we must remember too that he is master. He has only to say 'I wish,' and could take us by force with his soldiers." This shows that, deep down, Mrs. Loiseau understands the gendered aspect of the officer's demand; he is simply asking from Miss Rousset what he could otherwise violently take from any of the women. In the face of this threat, though, the women choose not to stand up for their collective interest, but rather to protect themselves by justifying Miss Rousset's sacrifice. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, for instance, tries to convince herself that sleeping with the officer isn't so bad: she thinks to herself that it is a pity the German is "not French, because he would make a pretty [well-dressed commander], one all the women would rave over."

While the married women's choice to throw Miss Rousset to the wolves is cynical and self-serving, it does, sadly, protect them: by sacrificing Miss Rousset and aligning with the more powerful men, all of the married women emerge with their bodies and dignity intact. This bleak ending, in which Miss Rousset has lost control of her body while the married women still cannot control their lives, shows how men maintain power. They encourage the divisions between women, all the while controlling those women for their own benefit.

EXPLOITATION AND CLASS HIERARCHY

The beginning of "Boule de Suif" is tepidly optimistic about class mobility. While the ten French travelers sharing a carriage adhere to their society's strict class hierarchy, the lowest among them—the plucky and defiant Miss Rousset—nevertheless earns the grudging admiration of the others. For a moment, it seems that she might be included in higher society by sheer force of personality. However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the class hierarchy will not be bent. The wealthy include Miss Rousset when she can be useful to them, manipulate her into a devastating decision that benefits them, and then discard her when she is no longer of use. By showing the wealthy exploiting a poor and vulnerable woman so ruthlessly, Maupassant suggests that class mobility is an illusion, and that the exploitation of the poor for the benefit of the rich is at the very heart of class hierarchy.

The prostitute, Miss Rousset, begins the story passionate, resourceful, and defiant, giving the impression that her inferior class position does not define her. While one might expect that Miss Rousset would be shy in the presence of wealthier companions, she "[thows] her neighbors…a provoking, courageous look" when she hears them whispering belittling things about her. This stuns them all into silence, which suggests that her fortitude might change their behavior. Additionally, when Miss Rousset speaks up about political issues in the carriage, her courage earns the admiration of some of her companions. The wealthy women "[feel] themselves drawn, in spite of themselves, toward this prostitute so full of dignity." In this moment, Maupassant leads the reader to believe that perhaps the force of Miss Rousset's personality will transcend her class, convincing others to treat her as an equal. This seems, for a moment, to be possible when the German officer first proposes that Miss Rousset sleep with him in exchange for the group's freedom. Initially, "indignation is rife" among the group, and there is a "blast of anger, a union of all for resistance, as if a demand had been made on each one of the party." In this fleeting moment of solidarity, it seems that Miss Rousset's wealthier companions see their fates and interests as shared, despite Miss Rousset's lower class status.

Quickly, though, the wealthy close rank, deciding to make Miss Rousset sleep with the officer in order to protect themselves. The morning after their show of solidarity, "it [becomes] apparent that a coldness had arisen toward Ball-of-Fat." The travelers all resent the very determination and defiance that just days before they had admired. Hypocritically, they now wish to tame that defiance to serve their own desires. To manipulate her into doing as they wish, the group attempts to reason with her while simultaneously isolating her. The women take to calling her "mademoiselle" instead of "madame" to show their disdain for her refusal to do the group's bidding. Meanwhile, the wealthiest traveler, the Count, asks Miss Rousset "you prefer to leave us here, exposed to…violences…rather than consent to a favor which you have so often given your life?" reminding her of her inferior social position and framing her resistance as immoral. The group's crowning achievement is creating an explicit "plan of attack, [a] ruse to employ" to manipulate Miss Rousset into sleeping with the officer. They pretend they're having a regular conversation in front of Miss Rousset, while steering the discussion towards ethics and making the pointed suggestion that "any action blamable in itself often becomes meritorious by the thought it springs from" (in other words, that a seemingly immoral act is

moral if done for the right reasons, or that the ends justify the means). The group pretends that they are allowing Miss Rousset to make up her own mind, but truly they are telling her that she must make the choice to harm herself for the collective good. After this, Miss Rousset caves.

Miss Rousset's sacrifice earns the French travelers their freedom, but it does not earn Miss Rousset an equal place among them; in fact, as they travel home, the others treat her coldly and she is devastated by shame. The ending, then, makes it clear that Miss Rousset was exploited: she made a horrific choice for the benefit of a group to which she presumably believed she now belonged. In the aftermath, though, it becomes clear that her companions—despite her sacrifice on their behalf—have no plans to reward or include her, even with the basic kindness of sharing their **food**. As the wealthier members of the traveling party stand in for French elites overall, this ending can be seen as a commentary on the predatory nature of rigid class hierarchy, which offers the false promise of social mobility so that the poor are willing to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the wealthy.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BASKET OF FOOD

In "Boule de Suif," baskets of food represent a society's finite resources and the subjective and often unfair way in which they are distributed. When the ten travelers make their way from Rouen to Tôtes, they are separated from ordinary civilization. This means that all the wealthy travelers do not have accesses to the resources they can usually count on, temporarily redistributing power only to those who have resources to share. On the first half of the journey, this is Miss Rousset. Although she had brought the basket of food for herself, Miss Rousset chooses to evenly distribute her food and drink among the travelers—despite their scornful attitude towards her—modeling an egalitarian ethic. On the second half of the journey, however, everyone has a basket of provisions besides Miss Rousset, none of them choose to share, leaving Miss Rousset hungry, humiliated, and upset. The food in the carriage symbolizes how money and other resources flow through a society; people without resources often live at the whims and pleasures of those who have the option to distribute what they have.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Necklace and Other Short Stories* published in 1992.

Boule de Suif Quotes

> They were not troops, but a disbanded horde. The beards of the men were long and filthy, their uniforms in tatters, and they advanced at an easy pace without flag or regiment. All seem worn-out and back-broken […] in short they were a mobilized, pacific people, bending under the weight of the gun…
>
> Their leaders were former cloth or grain merchants, ex-merchants in tallow or sap, warriors of circumstance, elected officers on account of…the length of their mustaches…

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Instead of suggesting that war is a glorious fight for a meaningful cause, this opening passage shows disorganized, ragtag foot soldiers who have suffered due to their silly officers for no discernable reason. Maupassant depicts war, in other words, as demoralizing and destructive. To do so, he emphasizes a few things. The first is the suffering of the foot soldiers. Clearly, they have gone a long time without comfort or supplies, as their beards are long—suggesting that they have not been able to shave—and their torn uniforms have not been replaced. Furthermore, Maupassant describes them as "worn-out" and "back-broken," having bent "under the weight of the gun." This suggests the devastating toll of violence, both the violence they had to enact and the violence to which the Prussians subjected them. This violence hasn't glorified or excited the foot soldiers; they're demoralized and physically beaten down.

Maupassant also suggests in this passage that war is senseless. The story never spells out the cause of this war or its goals, which gives readers the sense that the reasons behind war are irrelevant here, and its effects on the people are all that's worth noticing. Furthermore, when Maupassant writes that these men are not "troops" but rather a "disbanded horde," he calls attention to the disorganization and purposelessness of this straggling army. In other words, instead of trained men serving a cause, this is more like a chaotic mob. To reinforce this sense, Maupassant describes them as walking slowly "without flag or regiment." That they're walking slowly suggests their lack of urgent purpose, and to march without a flag hints at the irrelevance to the soldiers of the patriotic cause for which they supposedly are fighting.

Finally, Maupassant shows the absurdity of this war by mocking the officers in charge. These are not, according to him, men chosen for their skill or experience in war; instead, relatively wealthy men (the merchant class) get to be officers based on the "length of their mustaches." The notion that an officer would be selected based on mustache length is meant to call attention to the vanity and silliness of the officers, and to mock the arbitrary notion that wealthy people should be officers while poorer men fight. Overall, Maupassant depicts this war as purposeless, disorganized, unfair, and even silly.

❝ It was occupation after invasion. Then the duty commences for the conquered to show themselves gracious toward the conquerors. After some time [...] the Prussian officer eats at the table. He is sometimes well bred and, through politeness, pities France, and speaks of his repugnance in taking part in the affair.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation describes the Prussian foot soldiers occupying the city of Rouen and uses surprisingly pleasant language. Maupassant is depicting a strange juxtaposition between the terrible "invasion" that the French were expecting and the quiet reality of "occupation." Although the French might have originally considered it their "duty" to welcome in the occupying soldiers, this passage suggests that over time that responsibility became easy and almost enjoyable. This scene also foreshadows the townspeople in Totes defending the Prussian soldiers by commenting on the sadness that the "invaders" feel at having to leave their homes. In this passage, the Prussians talk about their "repugnance" at having been involved in the war at all, which Maupassant suggests might be disingenuous—an attempt at the Prussians to be polite. However, it might also reflect that many of the foot soldiers on the ground during this war were not all that committed to their country's cause—after all, they would never personally benefit from it. In this way, both the soldiers and the townspeople can be considered to be victims of forces outside their control.

The image of the soldier at the dinner table also evokes an intimate, domestic feeling; usually, members of the same family are expected to eat dinner together. This accentuates how close some French have become to these polite soldiers, and it makes the Prussians seem much more like guests than like intruders. All of this is done to emphasize that border divisions—like those between countries—are much less potent than the rigid differences between social classes that Maupassant will explore during the rest of the story.

❝ The three men installed their wives at the back [of the carriage] and then followed them. Then the other forms, undecided and veiled, took in their turn the last places without exchanging a word.

Related Characters: Countess Hubert de Bréville, Count Hubert de Bréville , Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Mrs. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, Mr. Loiseau

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the journey—and especially in this quote—Maupassant divides the travelers into groups: businessmen, nobility, wives, and the rest of the carriage. In this passage, a sort of order is taking shape: the three men are the most powerful, then their wives, then the "other forms" who quietly take the "last places." This phrasing hints at the idea of social hierarchy and demonstrates what the supposed "natural" order might be. Maupassant spends the rest of the story questioning whether this supposed natural order is fair or just in French society, ultimately deciding that it is not. By having the "other forms" carry a mysterious nature, he shows how they will not be fitting neatly into this predetermined social structure that the other six travelers are used to. This division between men of commerce and their wives versus the rest of the group is the most basic of hierarchal divisions among the travelers, and it is the foundation for much of what is to come in the story.

Additional divisions also emerge between the sexes in this passage, as the wives are "installed" into the carriage both literally and figuratively. Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and the Count take their spouses from Rouen; the wives function almost like luggage for the three men. This will sharply contrasted Miss Rousset's autonomy, as she is the only single woman traveling alone, so she is making her own decisions. It will prove a source of frustration for the reader when they see how the other women remain loyal to the status quo despite their secondary places in it.

> These six persons formed the foundation of the carriage company, the society side, serene and strong, honest, established people, who had both religion and principle.

Related Characters: Mr. Loiseau , Countess Hubert de Bréville, Count Hubert de Bréville , Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Mrs. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator explains the makeup of the traveling carriage, this passage puts in plain terms what Maupassant needs the reader to understand going forward: these six people, despite having varying levels of wealth, see themselves unified as pillars of civilization. These couples—the Louseaus, the Carré-Lamadons, and the Hubert de Brevilles—think of themselves as the "foundation" that is necessary to functioning society; this is shown to be extremely ironic, because none of these characters have interest in their communities or their countries besides what they can extract from it. This is an early example Maupassant showing the hypocrisy of the wealthier travelers. The idea that these characters "ha[ve] religion" is also soon shown to be untrue, for they show no particular kindness or interest towards the two traveling nuns, and they end up using the nuns to their benefit later in the story. Additionally, the terms "honest" and "principle[d]" become markers throughout the story whenever Maupassant wants to draw the reader to something out of place, showing the words to be ironic.

It is important to note that the narration almost shifts here, pretending, for a moment, to be inside these characters' heads. The reader understands this sentence to be coming from the minds of the "six people" because it is flattering in a way that the narrator never otherwise conveys. Maupassant also uses this passage as foreshadowing because the descriptions "strong," "serene," and "honest" are so full of irony; he is suggesting that these six characters will in fact come to lack all of these traits that they consider themselves to have. As this is a story about class and mobility, Maupassant wants to make it clear early on who is presumed to have grace and dignity so that later he can highlight those traits in other characters. The arrogant mindset of these characters is important to understand, as it explains much of their behavior later in the story, and also because it sets them apart from the humble beliefs of the lower-class Miss Rousset.

> As soon as she was recognized, a whisper went around among the honest women, and the words "prostitute" and "public shame" were whispered so loud that she raised her head. Then she threw her neighbors such a provoking, courageous look that a great silence reigned [...then] conversation began among the three ladies, whom the presence of this girl had suddenly rendered friendly, almost intimate. It seemed to them they should bring their married dignity into union in opposition to that sold without shame; for legal love always takes on a tone of contempt for its free *confrère*.

Related Characters: Countess Hubert de Bréville, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Mrs. Loiseau, Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The married women immediately recognize Miss Rousset when she enters the carriage leaving Rouen, and their reactions towards her set the tone for the rest of the story. Responding in such a cruel way is their first instinct, and although they later extend small kindnesses, their first responses are clearly indicative of how they really feel: that Miss Rousset, as a prostitute, is far beneath them. The women wish to establish hierarchy within the coach, which is why they begin talking together and ignoring Miss Rousset. In many ways, these women's social statuses are all that they have because their husbands function as heads of household. Rather than be impressed by a single woman traveling alone, social standards make the married women resent and detest her. By shallowly bonding because of their "married dignity," they show how critical it was for a woman to be married in this time period, and how unusual Miss Rousset's presence in the carriage is. It also demonstrates that the women know how to use the one tool at their disposal: social shaming. This later proves to be enormously, tragically effective.

Miss Rousset's "courageous look" is one of the first signs that this woman is daring and resolute, contrasting with the submissive behavior of the other traveling women. Her strong will is an important part of the story, because it consistently sets her apart from the rest of the group. Earlier passages suggested that the wealthier travelers consider themselves highly principled, mostly on account of their lofty social positions, but instances like this indicate that Maupassant believes that bravery, rather than wealth and status, is indicative of good character.

[...] Loiseau with his eyes devoured the dish of chicken. He said: "Fortunately Madame had more precaution than we. There are some people who know how to think ahead always."

She turned toward him, saying: "If you would like some of it, sir? It is hard to go without breakfast so long."

He saluted her and replied: "Faith, I frankly cannot refuse; I can stand it no longer. Everything goes in time of war, does it not, Madame?"

Related Characters: Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat), Mr. Loiseau (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the first half of the journey, when Miss Rousset finally takes out her basket to eat her food and the other travelers become intensely jealous. The wealthiest characters' extreme fury towards Miss Rousset, because she has food, starts to show cracks in their civilized outward image. But Mr. Loiseau (who importantly is of a class closest to Miss Rousset's), is not afraid to "lower" himself to her level so that he can eat. By praising her for her ability to "think ahead always," he is actually acknowledging that he made a mistake when he did not pack food. While, yes, he is still using Miss Rousset for his benefit, Mr. Loiseau does not think so highly of himself that he cannot even talk to her, like the others do.

This division even among the "society side"—the six wealthy travelers—is important for Maupassant, because he wants to demonstrate that the richest in the group behave the worst. Maupassant also wants to create an unusual social environment by putting Miss Rousset in a position of power—she has resources to distribute, and the rest of the group is suddenly reliant on her. In the tradition of literary naturalism, this upending of social norms shows the characters' true colors.

Mr. Loiseau can not help but get an insult in, though, even as he shares the young woman's food; by saying that "everything goes" he is plainly implying that it is an unusual circumstance that they find themselves in, where everyone is relying on the morality of a prostitute. Still, Miss Rousset's happiness to share makes it clear that the other characters in the carriage prejudged Miss Rousset's integrity.

They could not eat this girl's provisions without speaking to her. And so they chatted, with reserve at first; then, as she carried herself well, with more abandon. The ladies De Breville and Carré-Lamadon, who were acquainted with the ins and outs of good-breeding, were gracious with a certain delicacy. The Countess, especially, showed that amiable condescension of very noble ladies who do not fear being spoiled by contact with anyone, and was charming. But the great Madame Loiseau, who had the soul of a plebian, remained crabbed, saying little and eating much.

Related Characters: Countess Hubert de Bréville, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Mrs. Loiseau, Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, coming right after the whole group has finished Miss Rousset's basket of food, again shows the class hierarchy within the wealthier side of the carriage—this time among the women in particular. The rich Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the regal Countess consider themselves to be excellent examples of fine society; to that effect, they feel an obligation to speak to Miss Rousset after they take her food—if only out of guilt or duty. When Maupassant writes that the Countess shows "amiable condescension" that only "very noble ladies" have, and that she does not "fear being spoiled by contact with anyone," he is spelling out the privilege that this woman enjoys because of her wealth. Not only does she have money, but she has *so much* money that she risks the least by speaking to members of a lower social class. After all, nobody is going to mistake her for someone lower than she is merely because she has spoken to Miss Rousset. This makes the wealthiest characters' earlier (and later) rejection of Miss Rousset even more hypocritical, because they have the least to lose.

Mrs. Loiseau's surly behavior demonstrates that she would risk the most by affiliating with Miss Rousset—she is the closest socially to Miss Rousset and perhaps in danger of being lumped in with her if the two converse. But it also suggests that Mrs. Loiseau doesn't adhere to the same shallow social obligations that the other two married women do. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess welcoming Miss Rousset into conversation shows again how social acceptance is the one piece of (gendered) power that they do enjoy the carriage, and these women extend

discussion only after Miss Rousset has proved useful.

> "I believed at first that I could remain," she said. "I had my house full of provisions, and I preferred to feed a few soldiers rather than expatriate myself, to go I knew not where. But as soon as I saw them, those Prussians, that was too much for me! They made my blood boil with anger, and I wept for very shame all day long."

Related Characters: Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Miss Rousset explains to the carriage why she chose to leave Rouen. This is a meaningful quote because it works on a few levels, the first clearly being that it highlights Miss Rousset's intense patriotism. Maupassant has already explained why the three married men left: for commercial, opportunistic reasons. Their wives accompanied them out of duty. Understanding this, the reader sees a sharp contrast between Miss Rousset's strong French patriotism and the men's selfish tendencies. She even insists that she does not *want* to "expatriate [her]self," but the shame that came with feeding the Prussian soldiers forced her to avoid the occupation and leave. This passage also shows how Miss Rousset is the only autonomous woman in the carriage. By mentioning that she had a "house full of provisions," Maupassant highlights her independence in Rouen and the fact that she can rely on herself and make her own decisions about when to come and go. This is particularly unique in 19th century French society.

The description of Miss Rousset's "blood boil[ing] with anger" is intentionally vivid to demonstrate how her passionate nature can bubble to the surface. While this initially earns her the respect of her traveling companions, it is this very same passion that the group tries to tame once they are held hostage in Tôtes and are personally affected by Miss Rousset's resolve.

Sadly, Miss Rousset's stirring statement also functions retroactively as a piece of tragic irony; her contempt for the enemy soldiers is so specific and so concrete that being forced to sleep with a Prussian officer really feels like the worst possible conclusion for this strongminded woman. Miss Rousset's devotion to her country amplifies the pain of the ending and the cruelty of the characters who convince her to go against her beliefs.

> A stir was felt around her [...]. The Count approached her, saying:
>
> "You are wrong, Madame, for your refusal may lead to considerable difficulty, not only for yourself but for all your companions. It is never worth while to resist those in power"
>
> Everybody agreed with him, asking, begging, beseeching her to go [...] they all feared the complications that might result from disobedience.

Related Characters: Count Hubert de Bréville (speaker), The German Commander , Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Count begs Miss Rousset to accept the German officer's request to see her despite her total opposition to doing so. Here, Maupassant widens the hierarchical divisions among the travelers as well as demonstrates the story's overall power dynamics. The German officer, first of all, has immense power over the travelers because he is on the winning side of the war and in a high commanding position. His effect on the group is shown in the nervous "stir" that is felt when Miss Rousset bravely stands up to the pressure of his request. By telling Miss Rousset that she is plainly "wrong" to be brave in this instance, the Count steps in and ironically demonstrates his cowardice while trying to assert his authority. Because of the Count's high social (and gendered) position, Maupassant uses the Count to speak for the group by saying, "[i]t is never worth while to resist those in power" and spelling out their selfish intentions. Although the Count considers himself the *most* grand and the *most* honorable out of all the wealthy travelers, his coercion of Miss Rousset demonstrates the immense cruelty of those willing to sacrifice a more vulnerable person.

In addition, the group's hypocritical willingness to subject Miss Rousset to potential risk by "beseeching her to go" foreshadows the larger sacrifice that they will demand of her at the end of the story.

> They found themselves in a square [...] where they perceived some Prussian soldiers. The first one they saw was paring potatoes. The second, further off, was cleaning the hairdresser's shop. Another, bearded to the eyes, was tending a troublesome brat, cradling it and trying to appease it [...]. One of them was even washing the linen of his hostess, an impotent old grandmother [...]. Loiseau had a joke for the occasion: "They will repopulate the land!"

Related Characters: Mr. Loiseau (speaker), Count Hubert de Bréville , Mr. Carré-Lamadon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

The three men, upon finding Prussian soldiers in the center of Totes, are absolutely shocked by what they see. Throughout the story, the French characters describe the Prussians as lazy and as cruel occupiers; this scene changes that image. By including this scene, which technically does nothing in terms of plot, Maupassant clearly wants to show that there are two very different versions of the Prussian "enemy": the viscous and dirty occupiers that many French believe them to be, and the much softer reality that is found in this city's center. Particularly, Maupassant uses images related to family, such as "a troublesome brat" or an "old grandmother," to show how integrated these soldiers are into the community. Because elderly women and young children are often considered the most vulnerable members of society, Maupassant wants to demonstrate that the soldiers are not in fact taking advantage of the French like they do in so many rumors spread around the country. In fact, the soldiers are made to feel like a part of the households of these poorer French townspeople.

Mr. Loiseau is so incredulous that the very idea of French peasants and Prussian soldiers getting along warrants a joke. He is speaking what the other two men are thinking; these men, obsessed with commerce and skeptical of democracy, cannot understand class solidarity.

Additionally, these kind acts done by the Prussian foot soldiers are directly contrasted with the selfish behavior of the German commander, who is using the chaos of war for his own personal pleasure. He actually *does* extort the townspeople, as well as the travelers, and he clearly has no respect for the country he is occupying. This demonstrates once again how class divisions are unavoidable in war as is in everyday life.

> The three men mounted the staircase and were introduced to the best room of the inn, where the officer received them, stretched out in an armchair, his feet on the mantelpiece, smoking a long, porcelain pipe, and enveloped in a flamboyant dressing-gown, appropriated, without doubt, from some dwelling belonging to a common citizen of bad taste. He did not rise, nor greet them in any way, not even looking at them.

Related Characters: Count Hubert de Bréville , Mr. Loiseau , Mr. Carré-Lamadon, The German Commander

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is from the first day of captivity at the inn, when the wealthy men seek out the Prussian commander to ask why they are not allowed to leave. It is important to note that Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carre-Lamadon, and especially the Count are not used to being treated as commoners—they see themselves, again, as pillars of civilized society. When they enter "the best room of the inn," they are expecting a conversation among powerful equals. The German officer's "feet on the mantelpiece" indicate at once that the commander will not be showing them any respect during this meeting.

In addition, by saying that the officer "appropriated" his robe from a "common citizen," Maupassant shows this commander's disregard for the townspeople of Totes. He clearly just took the "flamboyant dressing-gown" from a villager, and its ugliness only makes it more of a marker of the officer's attitude towards the inhabitants of the town—one of careless condescension. Contrasted with the hard-working foot soldiers who have bonded with the poorer people of Totes, this commander shows that he is isolated from the true devastation of war and can enjoy the perks of his powerful position without risking or sacrificing anything.

> The breakfast was very doleful; and it became apparent that a coldness had arisen toward Ball-of-Fat, and that the night, which brings counsel, had slightly modified their judgements. They almost wished now that the Prussian has secretly found this girl, in order to give her companions a pleasant surprise in the morning. What could be more simple? Besides, who would know anything about it? She could save appearances by telling the officer that she took pity on their distress. To her, it would make little difference!

Related Characters: Countess Hubert de Bréville, Count Hubert de Bréville , Mrs. Loiseau, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Mr. Loiseau , Mr. Carré-Lamadon, Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Miss Rousset admits what the Prussian officer wants of her, the group begins to sour on her defiant attitude. Their "coldness" is a sign of things to come, because this feeling is directed at Miss Rousset rather than at the cruel commander. The passive language used here—saying that they'd wished the officer had simply "found this girl" in the night—shows that the group is downplaying the significance of the officer's demand. This also true when Maupassant writes that Miss Rousset sacrificing her body and her morals would just be a "pleasant surprise" for the rest of the group. Their collective belief that there is a "simple" solution to this problem further demonstrates their willingness to tone down the terrible reality of the situation.

Additionally, wishing that this had been done in "secret" overnight demonstrates the others' lack of honesty and integrity; the group clearly understands that what they're asking of Miss Rousset is wrong, but to them doing something wrong in secret would be acceptable. By suggesting that it would "make little difference" for Miss Rousset to sleep with this officer, because she has slept with many men, Maupassant shows the group to be even more deceitful; clearly the travelers understand that Miss Rousset would be devastated if she had to sleep with a Prussian, but they are lying to themselves to make themselves feel better. Importantly, suggesting that Miss Rousset could "save appearances" is also obviously insincere; Miss Rousset has never shown interest in appearances, instead it is all the wealthy travelers who are obsessed with status and image. This quote is filled with irony so that Maupassant can highlight the hypocrisy of each of the wealthier passengers. The mindset of the travelers in this passage shows that they never truly valued Miss Rousset's patriotism or her resolve, and they are willing to throw her to the wolves if it means that they can be on their way.

> "Well, we are not going to stay here and die of old age. Since it is the trade of this creature to accommodate herself to all kinds, I fail to see how she has the right to refuse one more than another…and to think that to-day we should be drawn into this embarrassment by this affected woman, this minx! For my part, I find that this officer conducts himself very well…and we must remember too that he is master. He has only to say 'I wish,' and he could take us by force with his soldiers."

Related Characters: Mrs. Loiseau (speaker), Countess Hubert de Bréville, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat), The German Commander

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

The quote comes from Mrs. Loiseau the day after the group learns about what the Prussian officer wants from Miss Rousset. By putting their heads together as soon as Miss Rousset is out of the room, the richer travelers physically demonstrate how members of the same social class will come together in warped camaraderie as soon as they are threatened. Mrs. Loiseau puts things in the cruelest—but most honest—terms; here, like her husband often does, Mrs. Loiseau demonstrates that she does not have a pretend air of civility that the wealthier Mrs. Carre-Lamadon and the Countess do. The rest of the group is clearly thinking the same thing but they rely on the poorest among them to say it, demonstrating their insincerity. By having Mrs. Loiseau talk about the "embarrassment" of being seen with Miss Rousset, Maupassant actually wants to suggest that the group themselves should be embarrassed by how poorly they're treating a fellow traveler.

In addition, by invoking the gendered hierarchy of their situation Mrs. Loiseau shows how none of the married women expect to have any autonomy over their choices or their bodies. She also makes this clear when she says that, as an officer for the victorious army, the Prussian commander could take what he wants by force. These elements might objectively sound startling, but they simply frustrate these wealthy travelers, as they are so used to people in lesser positions of power doing what they want. Miss Rousset must fall in line, Mrs. Loiseau suggests, as she is both female and poor and should therefore have no right to make choices that affect the rest of them. By invoking Miss Rousset's "trade," Mrs. Loiseau also specifically reminds the group that this woman is a prostitute and should be considered below the rest of society.

The Countess put to use the authority of her unwitting accomplice, and added to it the edifying paraphrase and axiom of Jesuit morals: "The needs justify the means."

Related Characters: Countess Hubert de Bréville, The Two Nuns, Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This statement comes right after the nuns have shared their story about Abraham and sacrifice. Although it was a religious tale, the Countess immediately seeks to draw a neat parallel between scripture and the current position Miss Rousset is in. Such a cunning move coming from a character who prides herself on civility and etiquette clearly shows how the wealthy travelers will stop at nothing to convince Miss Rousset to change her mind. Certainly, the Countess' statement is hypocritical because the group has shown that ends justifying the means is not the reason they believe Miss Rousset should sleep with the officer—it is because she has no right to refuse. Although the nuns spoke of personal sacrifice, the Countess is hoping to sacrifice another person for personal gain. Coming from the woman who made Miss Rousset feel the most welcomed into the group earlier in the story, this calculated pivot by the Countess is especially devastating.

No one looked at her or even thought of her. She felt herself drowned in the scorn of these honest scoundrels, who had first sacrificed her and then rejected her, like some improper or useless article. She thought of her great basket full of good things which they had greedily devoured…she felt ready to weep.

Related Characters: Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball-of-Fat)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, the whole traveling party is back in the carriage, which creates a sense of circularity, as the divisions from earlier passages resurface. This time, though, so much has happened that the idea that no one can look at Miss Rousset or "even [think] of her" is outrageous. Maupassant makes it so that that there is no final ambiguity for the reader: these "honest" men and women have no principles. This passage also emphasizes the true tragedy of Miss Rousset's position: it did not matter what she sacrificed for these wealthier travelers, the class divisions that existed in the beginning of the story are too to be rigid to ever change. While "drown[ing]" in the coldness from the rest of the carriage, Miss Rousset likens herself to a "useless article"; it is almost impossible to consider the strong-willed girl at the beginning of the story thinking about herself in this way, but this is how the wealthier travelers saw her all along, and through their cruelty they have finally succeeded in making Miss Rousset feel worthless.

The memory of the wealthier travelers "devour[ing]" the food Miss Rousset shared earlier in the trip is meant to show the reality of their character—they are nowhere near the "civilized" people they presume themselves to be, instead they are as ruthless as animals in the wild, bent on maintaining the natural order of things. This passage makes it clear that any kindness extended towards Miss Rousset was purely for self-preservation; now, she is no longer useful to them and must fall back down the social ladder.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOULE DE SUIF

For days, French soldiers with long beards and tattered uniforms have been wandering through town, seeming broken. Their units are disbanded and they march without a flag, seemingly by habit, looking tired and without resolve. Their leaders were once merchants but are now "warriors of circumstance," elected as officers based on their families or on "the length of their mustaches." They discuss battle strategy as though they alone are responsible for the fate of France, and they fear their foot-soldiers, whose bravery can quickly give way to debauchery.

The opening descriptions are cinematic, focusing on a group of people rather than specific characters. This demonstrates the way in which these French foot soldiers are united as one miserable unit, beaten down by war. Furthermore, the foot soldiers don't seem to have a clear allegiance to or investment in any cause (they're marching "without a flag" due to habit alone), emphasizing that this is just a job for them—albeit a risky and terrible one. This passage also implicitly criticizes military officers as being chosen, absurdly, based on money rather than experience or skill. Maupassant depicts the officers' strategy discussions as pompous, and he emphasizes the emptiness of their authority by revealing their fear of the foot soldiers they command.

The Prussian army is about to enter the French city of Rouen, and the National Guard has retreated. As the townspeople wait anxiously for the occupying army to arrive, the streets are empty and the shops are closed. When the Prussians arrive, the people of Rouen, who are shut inside their houses, feel oddly excited. It's the feeling of inevitable catastrophe, of security and law disappearing, leaving people powerless in the face of "unreasoning, ferocious brutality," destroying faith in justice, god, and reason.

Here, Maupassant shows how war disrupts the lives of everyday people. Those who weren't conscripted into the terrible job of foot soldier are now hiding inside their homes, unable to continue their lives or business, merely because of some wartime strategy that silly officers have cooked up. Maupassant depicts this as cataclysmic: they're expecting something so terrible to happen that they've lost faith in their bedrock principles, such as religion and justice. However, while their lives are undeniably upended, they are not so affected by the violence of war that they can't still a feel a little excitement at the prospect of change.

As the invaders become occupiers, the terror dissipates. Soon, Prussian officers eat at French dinner tables, politely expressing their distaste for having conquered Rouen. Some of the townspeople see an advantage in being kind to the Prussians; the Prussians are now in power, after all, and maybe opposing them wouldn't be brave so much as foolish. Many townspeople are polite to the Prussians in private, within their own homes, but they know not to do this in public. The streets remain empty except for the Prussian soldiers, who—despite their "great weapons of death"—seem to have no contempt for the people they've conquered.

The townspeople's initial fear is quickly shown to be misdirected: the Prussian soldiers are fairly similar to the citizens of Rouen. There is a distinct contrast between the intimidating weapons that the soldiers carry and the good manners that they have inside the homes of the French, complicating the French stereotype that their Prussian enemies are brutal and barbarous. Note the hypocrisy here of feeding and entertaining enemy soldiers at home while pretending not to know them in public. This is perhaps an indication that the French civilians are spineless, but it could also be seen as an acknowledgement that the goals of this war are irrelevant to everyday people. They stand to gain nothing personally from war, so it seems absurd to pretend to hate the Prussian soldiers even in private, especially when friendliness might benefit them.

Life continues, but there's a strange atmosphere in town: the "odor of invasion" affects everything. The Prussians start demanding money from the French, and while the townspeople can afford it, they bristle at this indignity. Prussian soldiers sometimes turn up murdered, since the "hatred of the foreigner" inspires those Frenchmen who are "ready to die for an idea." Nonetheless, once the Prussians have established order without horror or brutality, the townspeople once again focus on trade and commerce. Some locals with financial interests in the French-occupied city of Le Havre decide to travel there through Prussian territory.

This passage reveals the townspeople of Rouen to be of comfortable means: when the Prussians extort them, they object on principle—not because they don't have the money to pay. It's noteworthy that losing money seems to bother the people of Rouen more than the Prussian occupation itself, which they seem to have met with a shrug. This shows most civilians to be clearly unpatriotic, although the ones who uselessly murder Prussian soldiers in support of "an idea" alone also seem silly. In this way, Maupassant critiques both the nationalistic ideologues who fuel conflict and the self-interested civilians who will accept anything besides financial loss.

On a cold, frosty morning before daybreak, ten travelers meet by a small carriage. They are covered in blankets, but a few men recognize each other and comment that they are also bringing their wives. These men are Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and Count Hubert de Breville. All three determine that they will not be returning to Rouen—they'd go over to England if the Prussians ever reach Le Havre—because all three of the men "ha[ve] the same projects" and thus are "of the same mind."

These men do not care where they end up as long as there is commercial opportunity, showing a lack of patriotism and commitment to their country. They act as though the war were merely a nuisance, rather than devastating, which shows how relatively insulated they have been from the violence. Notably, these men discuss their wives as though they were property—they're bringing their wives with them in the same way they might bring luggage.

It begins to snow, and the coachman starts harnessing the carriage and suggests that the travelers get inside. The three men "install" their wives into the coach, enter, and are then followed by the four others who are still covered and indistinct. The three married women—Mrs. Loiseau, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, and Countess Hubert de Breville—sit towards the back and bring out foot stoves. The carriage finally leaves, but it moves slowly because of the snow. Day breaks, and light enters the carriage, illuminating all of the travelers.

When Maupassant says that the men "install" their wives into the carriage, he emphasizes how little power the married women have. The women aren't depicted entering the carriage of their own volition; rather, their husbands place them there, as though they were inanimate. It's also immediately clear, when the married women sit together, that they are a group united only by their status as wives. After all, these women seem not to know each other, but they're expected to become companions nonetheless.

Aside from the three married couples there are four other travelers, and in the light of day they all eye each other curiously. Sitting next to the other women are two nuns who hold rosary beads and mutter a series of prayers. One has smallpox all over her face and the other is gaunt and has lung disease. Besides these nuns, there are two single travelers: a man and a woman, Cornudet and Miss Elizabeth Rousset. Cornudet is immediately identified as a democrat, angering and irritating the other men, and Miss Rousset is recognized as a prostitute, horrifying the married women.

By calling attention to the nuns' noticeable physical ailments, Maupassant shows that they have sacrificed many human comforts for their religion. But Maupassant does not suggest that this is a worthwhile trade: the nuns do not seem particularly happy, and being unmarried doesn't seem to make them any more free than the married women in the coach—the nuns, after all, are embedded in a Church hierarchy that expects them to submit to men. Along with the nuns, Cornudet and Miss Rousset are quickly identified as outliers in the carriage—just as they are outliers in genteel society. For Miss Rousset this is because of her "scandalous" profession as prostitute, and for Cornudet it is because of his politics (the other men, already shown to prioritize commercial interests over any particular ideology, have no patience for politics). The married travelers' immediate rejection of Cornudet and Miss Rousset demonstrates high society's self-importance and rigid adherence social hierarchy.

Mrs. Loiseau, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, and the Countess start to whisper things like "public shame," loud enough so that Miss Rousset can hear it. She throws them a fierce look, though, and everybody averts their eyes (except for Mr. Loiseau, who cannot look away). The married "honest" women draw together, forming a group based on "married dignity," and they quickly start chatting as though they had always been excellent friends.

By shaming Miss Rousset, the married women hope to embarrass her while also distancing themselves from her. These women choose to act like fast friends, bonding in a clearly superficial way just to make sure Miss Rousset feels unwelcomed. This highlights the shallowness of these women; moments ago, they were strangers, but now they use the "insult" of Miss Rousset's presence to align themselves. In the face of this cruelty, Miss Rousset's strong will is evident and she refuses to be humiliated. The loud whispering designed to embarrass her instead causes her to bravely stand up for herself (by staring the others down). Mr. Loiseau is the only character who doesn't avoid looking at Miss Rousset, establishing his pattern of ignoring social niceties out of impulse or curiosity.

Cornudet, too, draws the married men together against his rabble-rousing democratic ideas. The Count discusses the "havoc" that the war has caused, such as losing cattle and crops (although he'll hardly feel the financial loss). Mr. Carré-Lamadon talks about large amount of money he has stashed away as a reserve. Mr. Loiseau, it turns out, sold the French government all of the leftover wine he'd had in his cellars, and he is looking to collect on this when he arrives in Le Havre. The three are "brothers through money."

Again, the three married men disapprove of the democrat Cornudet because their only focus is on commercial projects. This selfishness is highlighted by the shallow conversation that they have while intentionally excluding Cornudet. The Count talking about the perils of war shows how removed he is from the men on the ground, Mr. Carré-Lamadon bragging about his savings shows how he was never under any real threat during the war, and Mr. Loiseau making a huge sale to the French government when it was in disarray shows how he used the chaos of war to profit. Maupassant is reiterating the married men's inclination towards valuing personal comfort over the needs of their country.

Most of the group expects to eat lunch on their way in the town of Tôtes. But the carriage has moved so slowly that it now looks as though they'll be lucky to make it there by nightfall. Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and Count Hubert expect to find some small eating-house or bar, but the Prussian occupation has scared away businesses in the area. The three men leave the coach and run up to farms along road in search of food, but the peasants of the French countryside have learned to hide their food so that Prussian soldiers don't come and take provisions by force.

These wealthy men—used to trade and commerce—expected to be able to buy their food along the way and are completely stumped when they cannot get what they want. In this moment, titles and money have no effect, and it is telling how disorientated and confused this makes these men. Their belief that they could buy or even take food from the French country people shows how accustomed they are to having access to resources and getting their way; it also shows that they do not mind exploiting people who clearly have less.

By now it is one o'clock in the afternoon, and everybody in the carriage is extremely hungry. Mr. Loiseau says loudly that there is a "hollow in [his] stomach." Nobody is in the mood to speak anymore because they are thinking about how much they'd like to eat. Miss Rousset keeps checking something underneath her seat, but then straightening up and looking around at her traveling companions. Mr. Loiseau makes a joke about giving "a thousand francs" for a piece of ham—a joke that his wife Mrs. Loiseau does not appreciate, as she is not interested in wasting money, even in jest. The Count says that he cannot understand why he didn't think to bring food. Everyone else "reproach[es]" themselves in the same way.

Although it is not known yet in the narrative, Maupassant later shows that, in this scene, Miss Rousset is specifically not eating because the rest of the characters do not have food. This selflessness sets her apart from the other characters, who never show that level of caring. Mr. Loiseau demonstrates his usual pattern of making a joke during tense times; his wife, however, does not appreciate jokes about money, which subtly demonstrates that the Loiseaus have less money than the Carré-Lamadons and the Hubert de Brevilles. This reaffirms that there is a hierarchy even among the wealthy.

Cornudet, however, at least has rum. He offers it to the group, but everybody coldly refuses him, except for Mr. Loiseau who takes two gulps. The merchant is now in a good mood, as the alcohol warms him up, and he makes a joke about eating the "fattest of the passengers." Cornudet laughs, but everyone else is a little horrified, as they think it is a reference to Miss Rousset. The nuns stop mumbling into their roseries but keep their eyes cast downwards.

Mr. Loiseau, again, demonstrates his typical brashness by making a tasteless joke during an uneasy situation. Although most of the carriage doesn't laugh, nobody stands up for Miss Rousset—not even the nuns, who one might assume would disapprove of cruel behavior. Everyone else's unwillingness to come to her defense further divides Miss Rousset from her traveling peers.

The coach trudges on—it is now three o'clock, and the passengers are in pain they are so hungry. Unable to resist any longer, Miss Rousset bends down and pulls out a **basket** from under her seat. Beneath a clean white napkin, there is a feast—chickens, pates, fruits, along with four bottles of wine; she packed three whole days' worth of food in case they did not reach an inn. Miss Rousset starts quietly eating the food. As the smell fills the carriage, everyone's mouth waters and resentment grows. Some of the other women begin to have violent thoughts towards Miss Rousset.

Miss Rousset is not part of upper-class "civilized" society and she is used to providing for herself—this is clear because of how much food she packed, and because she did not simply expect to buy food along the way. This resourcefulness momentarily makes her the most powerful traveler in the carriage, and the other travelers—many of whom are used to feeling superior—resent her viciously because of this shifted power dynamic.

Mr. Loiseau cannot stop looking at Miss Rousset's chicken, and he finally speaks to her, praising her foresight. Miss Rousset immediately offers him some **food**. He says that he could not possibly refuse. "Everything goes in time of war, does it not, Madame?" he says. He starts to eat so happily that the rest of the carriage becomes even more distressed that they themselves are not eating.

Although everyone wants some of Miss Rousset's food, Mr. Loiseau is the only person to put aside his pride and pay her a compliment to get what he wants. His assertion that "everything goes" shows how he would typically not be speaking so freely with a prostitute. Miss Rousset's kindness—she chooses to ignore his joke from earlier—sets the standard for thoughtful behavior in the carriage.

Miss Rousset then offers her **food** to the two nuns, who also eagerly accept. Cornudet decides to join in and they enjoy a sort of picnic in the carriage while the others watch. The remaining passengers open and close their mouths, sick with hunger and fury. Mr. Loiseau, after a time, convinces Mrs. Loiseau to also accept Miss Rousset's offer.

Miss Rousset's willingness to share with the two nuns demonstrate her inclination to sacrifice on their behalf even though they've not extended any of the same courtesy. With Cournudet, Miss Rousset, the nuns, and the Loiseaus all eating, it is only the two wealthiest couples who are now suffering from an inability to see Miss Rousset as a worthy companion. At this point it is clear to the reader that Miss Rousset would share from the basket if the wealthier travelers were not ignoring her.

At this point, Mr. Carré-Lamadon and Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Count and Countess are in total agony—they can't believe that food is so close but that they are not eating it. Suddenly, with a sigh, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon goes pale and faints. Her husband panics and nobody knows what to do until one of the nuns offers a bit of wine. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon is revived and urged to finish a whole glass. The group determines that the faint was from hunger.

Mrs. Carré-Lamadon is so hungry that she faints—and still she won't consider sharing food with a prostitute. This rigid adherence to class separation is shown to be excessive, and even dangerous. The nun's revival of Mrs. Carré-Lamadon is reminiscent of a religious ceremony, but the scene is turned on its head because the woman is not drinking the blood of Christ but the wine of a prostitute.

Miss Rousset is very upset, and she stammers how she absolutely would have given her food to the "ladies and gentlemen" if she'd "dared." Mr. Loiseau implores the rest of the group to abandon normal customs and accept the young woman's offer of food. The four hungry travelers still do not agree, until, after hesitation, the Count finally says that they will accept, with much thanks.

When she refers to the Carré-Lamadons and the Count and Countess as the "ladies and gentlemen," Miss Rousset is acknowledging her lower status in the carriage. She wants to be kind and share the food among the group, but she is intimidated by the barriers of wealth and class that the others clearly take so seriously. Mr. Loiseau is unable to convince the others to eat from the basket, but the Count (who has the highest status of any traveler) easily convinces them, demonstrating again a clear hierarchy between all travelers.

The whole group descends on the **basket** and quickly empties it. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess now allow themselves to talk to Miss Rousset (feeling an obligation because they've eaten her food). Although they speak casually at first, Miss Rousset carries herself very well, in the opinion of the fancier women, and soon they talk "with more abandon." Mrs. Loiseau, though, is a bit surly; she remains quiet and eats.

In swiftly devouring the contents of Miss Rousset's basket, the group is perhaps parallel to a pack of hungry animals, suggesting that the wealthier characters are not as poised as they might like to think. Still, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess feel socially obligated to talk to Miss Rousset after they've finished eating, preserving some vague social niceties. Mrs. Loiseau, as the poorest married woman, doesn't feel the need to do this—but she also appears momentarily left out of the group. This, again, shows divisions even within the wealthy travelers and suggests that the wealthiest characters are more cunning and calculating.

Discussing the war, the group contrasts the Prussians' horrible acts with French bravery. As they share personal stories, Miss Rousset says that, despite having a house stocked with food (and by all accounts a thriving career), she left Rouen because she could not bear the sight of the Prussians descending on her city. The Prussians make her "blood boil" and she'd even tried to choke one of them. The others are impressed by her fortitude.

Miss Rousset reveals that she is the only traveler who has ever attacked a Prussian; she also is the only character who gave up personal comfort on account of patriotic pride. These two things are contrasted with the shallow earlier conversations, when the others had mostly suffered simple financial inconveniences and had still found a way to be upset.

Hearing her story, Cornudet adopts a smug smile, as though he himself had fought a Prussian. He gives a short but didactic political lecture, then makes an insulting comment about Napoleon Bonaparte III. Because Miss Rousset is a Bonapartist, she lashes out at him, demanding exactly what *he* would have done if *he'd* been in charge—would he have ever gone into battle himself? The Count then steps in to "calm" the "exasperated" young woman. Although there is awkwardness in the carriage afterwards, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess are even more impressed by Miss Rousset's outburst.

Cornudet sees himself as some sort of political messiah, but Miss Rousset's outburst shows that she sees the hypocrisy in him (after all, she has done more for her country than Cornudet has) and it also shows that she is unafraid to speak her mind. The Count believes he can always act as a voice of reason, because of his status, and by coming into the conversation to quiet Miss Rousset he attempts to take control; he simply sees her as an "exasperated" woman, not as a lively equal. The wealthy Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and the Countess's silent appreciation of Miss Rousset show their inability to ever say what they are feeling.

It is now ten o'clock and they're still in the carriage. The food is gone, night falls, and the group stops talking as they digest. They feel the cold again. The Countess gives her foot stove to Miss Rousset, and Mrs. Loiseau and Mrs. Carré-Lamadon give theirs to the two nuns.

For these brief moments there appears to be an egalitarian atmosphere in the carriage—particularly among the women—which is clearly prompted by Miss Rousset's sharing of her food.

At long last, the carriage arrives in the town of Tôtes. The group traveled thirteen hours in one day; they are exhausted, and it is late. The coach pulls up in front of an inn, but before the group can take shelter inside, they hear a German voice in the darkness and the sound of a sword on the ground. Everyone is frightened. The driver opens the carriage door and shines a lantern on the group, who all look wide-eyed and fearful. Next to the driver they see a Prussian officer—an "excessively tall" young man who is "squeezed into his uniform" and with "an enormous mustache." He asks them all to descend.

The Prussian officer is reminiscent of the French commanders chosen "on account of…the lengths of their mustaches." The reference to the Prussian's mustache suggests that this officer, too, is unfit for his position. The rest of this description emphasizes this point and makes him a conundrum—a character who shouldn't physically be intimidating but who is nonetheless intimidating, on account of his power and station alone. Maupassant once again shows the arbitrary way that commanders are chosen at wartime.

The two nuns obey the order first, followed by the Count and Countess, then Mr. Carré-Lamadon and Mrs. Carré-Lamadon then Mr. Loiseau and Mr. Loiseau. Mr. Loiseau greets the officer, who looks right through him. Although they are closest to the door, Miss Rousset and Cornudet leave the carriage last. Miss Rousset is dismayed and even a little "disgusted" at her companions' docility.

Miss Rousset leaving the carriage last is a small act of patriotic defiance, contrasted again with the other characters' willingness to privilege personal safety over expressing their patriotism by resisting the order.

Finally, the group can enter the kitchen of the inn. The German officer asks the driver for the travelers' papers (which state their names and professions) and determines that they all have clearances to travel. Since everything is in order, he leaves, and the group breathes a collective sigh of relief. They even get their appetite back.

That the documents include mention of everyone's profession foreshadows what is to come, when the Prussian officer will demand Miss Rousset sleep with him before the rest of the group leaves. Maupassant creates a sense of foreboding around the officer—so unqualified for his status but yet with so much power—and it is not difficult to feel uneasy because he now knows that Miss Rousset is a prostitute.

They group orders dinner. A little while later, before the food is ready, the inn keeper Mr. Follenvie comes down. Slightly out of breath, he lets the group know that the Prussian officer wishes to see Miss Rousset. She bristles and insists that she will not go. The group is clearly bothered, but the Count says to her that she would be wrong to "resist those in power." He makes the argument that it must be about some very small matter, and the rest of the group begs her to comply with the officer's order. She does, but not before telling the group "[i]t is for you that I do this." The Countess grasps Miss Rousset's hands in thanks.

Here, the Prussian officer exercises the power he has over Miss Rousset when he makes this request; he has the upper hand both because of his gender and because of his status as commanding officer of the victorious army. Miss Rousset shows her unflinching devotion to her country by refusing to see him; the Count, though, does not value her firm stance and he essentially chides her for it. Speaking for the group, the Count demonstrates how the others are already willing to ask Miss Rousset to sacrifice for them. The Countess's hand-grabbing is a nice touch, but Maupassant makes sure it reads as an empty gesture—if she really cared about Miss Rousset in the fond way that she suggests, she would not ask her to bend to the officer's will.

The group is nervous because they now fear the possible repercussions of Miss Rousset's hot temper. But ten minutes later she returns, flustered and angry but uninterested in sharing what happened. Even the Count cannot get it out of her. So, the group sits down to dinner. Despite their initial alarm, the travelers enjoy a merry meal, full of cider and wine and, for Cornudet, beer—the drink of revolutionary democrats.

The group is already showing signs of their characteristic hypocrisy; earlier they had valued Miss Rousset's determination, but when their personal safety is at risk, they change their minds. Cornudet is in his element at this dinner—drinking and talking politics, far away from any fighting.

Before dinner is over, the war comes up in conversation again. Mr. Follenvie and Mrs. Follenvie join the other travelers, and the innkeeper's wife quite enjoys talking. She is livid about the war—she has two sons in the army, plus Prussian soldiers took some money from her. She calls the Prussians lazy, dirty, greedy, and useless. But she also makes a point about how countries, when at war, treat soldiers "as if they were game." Cornudet and Mrs. Follenvie agree on something substantial: that the kings and rulers of empire who make war should be punished.

Mrs. Follenvie's comments mirror the sentiment of many French citizens: that the other side is full of horrible people. But, her observation that people at the top levels make decisions that mostly affect the lives of poorer people spells out Maupassant's message of class inequity in wartime: the young men, as foot soldiers, get treated like "game," and the kings and commanders make decisions without ever feeling their full effect.


Meanwhile, in a corner, Mr. Loiseau sells the innkeeper six cases of wine. Later that night, for fun, he spies on the hallway after everybody has gone to bed. Mr. Loiseau sees Miss Rousset appear in the corridor—then, he also sees Cornudet. The two are outside Miss Rousset's room, and she seems to be pushing Cornudet away. She says no, no, not "[w]hen there are Prussians in the house, in the very next room, perhaps." Cornudet, rejected, leaves Miss Rousset alone.

Mr. Loiseau is always looking for a good trade opportunity, and for a bit of fun. When Miss Rousset turns down Cornudet, she does it because of her unwavering patriotism—she couldn't imagine sleeping with anyone when there are Prussians "in the very next room, perhaps," and even the self-serving Cornudet respects this. Mr. Loiseau will later recount this scene after Miss Rousset sleeps with the Prussian officer and, instead of finding anything sad about it, think it is hilarious.


At the agreed-upon time the next morning, all of the travelers are ready to leave Tôtes. Inexplicably, however, the carriage is not prepared. They are certain they told the driver eight o'clock; mystified, Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and the Count walk into town to try to sort it out. In town, they come across Prussian foot soldiers helping the townspeople with their daily tasks—paring potatoes, doing laundry, even looking after little children. The Count asks a townsperson about the strange co-habitation, and the villager explains that these Prussian soldiers are victims of the war too, just like the French, and that they, too, "weep for their homes." The three traveling men are incredulous. Mr. Loiseau makes a joke about the French and the Prussians "repopulating the land."

Here, the Prussian soldiers are so much kinder than any of the French travelers anticipated. Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and the Count show how removed they are from working-class people when they are shocked that enemies of the same social class might have something in common. When a townsperson says that the Prussians "weep for their homes," he engenders deep sympathy for all the young soldiers who have been displaced by a war they did not choose to fight.


They finally locate their driver, who informs the men that he's been given instructions not to prepare the carriage. Again, the men are mystified. The driver explains that he'd been handed strict orders from the Prussian officer. None of these men know why.

The three wealthy men are not used to having trouble getting what they want. The Prussian officer is leveraging all the power that he has over these men, who are bewildered that they are being treated so commonly.

Returning to the inn, the only thing the travelers can do is wait. Two hours later, when the innkeeper wakes up, they ask him what happened. But Mr. Follenvie knows as much as the driver—only that there were explicit orders from the Prussian officer not to let the group go. The Count requests to see the commander; he and Mr. Carré-Lamadon attempt to leverage their status and their titles for a meeting. The officer says he will see them after lunch, around one o'clock; the men must wait.

Again, the Prussian officer is putting the wealthy men in a position they are not used to being in: the position of a common person. By making them wait, he is leveraging even more power from his status as commander, further emphasizing how he, unlike the poor Prussian foot soldiers, almost enjoys the effects of this war on his life and status.

When the Prussian officer finally receives the Count, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and Mr. Loiseau, the officer has his feet up on his desk, he is draped in a garish silk robe, and he is smoking a pipe. Despite the travelers' inquiries, the officer will neither allow them to leave nor tell them why they cannot go. The men leave the office stunned.

Maupassant hammers home the contrast between the hard-working Prussian foot soldiers and this lazy Prussian commander by highlighting the insulting, excessive behavior of the officer. Instead of fighting the war, he's holed up at an inn wearing silk, lounging in an armchair and abusing his power. It's profane to think that this man is giving foot soldiers orders that might lead to their deaths. The discomfort of Mr. Loiseau, Mr. Carré-Lamadon, and particularly the Count again shows how they are used to getting whatever they ask for because of their wealth and class.

The group is now wallowing in boredom at the inn. They nervously try to piece together why they are being detained; the "richest [are] the most frightened," as they feel that they might be held for ransom.

Unable to leverage their wealth to get what they want, their money now becomes a burden. These travelers refuse to see the irony that there are much poorer members of society being extorted; each one is only focused on themselves.

That night, before dinner, Mr. Follenvie appears and asks if Miss Rousset has "changed her mind." Even more forcefully than before, Miss Rousset insists that she will never, ever change her mind. As the innkeeper leaves, the group crowds around her, asking her to explain what is going on. Miss Rousset relays that the Prussian officer wants to sleep with her. The group responds with total indignation. Cornudet even breaks his glass. But the next morning, everyone's shock has worn off and the travelers start to wonder what the fastest way out of the situation is.

The group's initial support of Miss Rousset shows the last gasp of goodwill left over from the carriage ride. However, the change in tone the next morning demonstrates how the wealthier characters ultimately prioritize personal protection over the wants and needs of people in lower social stations. Again, by resenting Miss Rousset for her strong-willed resistance to giving into the officer, they are now upset about a trait they had previously admired, only because they are now negatively impacted by it.


Bored to death, the group wanders around the town with a growing feeling of helplessness. The married men discuss escape plans (none of which are possible). When the Prussian officer passes the group out on their walk, the three married women are mortified that they're in the presence of Miss Rousset. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon thinks to herself that the officer is even kind of attractive (she'd know—she's been friendly with a few officers) and that if he were French there'd be nothing wrong with him.

This passage shows the married women in the group re-assuming the superiority over Miss Rousset that they'd felt when she first entered the carriage. Mrs. Carré-Lamadon reverts to class solidarity rather than gender solidarity when she muses about how the officer is handsome, implying that it wouldn't be a big deal at all to sleep with him. Rather than feel animosity towards the Prussian officer who is attempting to extort Miss Rousset, the women revert to their classist way of thinking when they are embarrassed to be associated with Miss Rousset.

The next morning, the group can hardly speak to each other, since they are so full of boredom and despair. When Miss Rousset heads into town by herself for a christening, the married travelers immediately put their heads together and try to figure out how to get out of this situation. Mr. Loiseau comes up with the idea of leaving Miss Rousset if the Prussian will let the rest of them go. However, since the officer "under[stands] human nature" and knows that if he keeps everyone he's more likely to get what he wants, they abandon this idea. Mrs. Loiseau—who has had enough—asks why Miss Rousset "has the right to refuse one [man] more than another." She insists that the officer "respects married women" and he really could just take any of the women in the inn by force if he wanted to.

By talking about Miss Rousset as soon as she is out of the room, the group is reaffirming what they decided in the beginning of the story: that she is not one of them. Mr. Loiseau's suggestion is harsh but true to his character; although the group does not often listen to him, they do this time, almost happy that he'd come up with the suggestion so that the others didn't have to. Mrs. Loiseau's outburst is indicative of the overall mindset in the room. Her focus on the distinction between married and single women shows how little autonomy women are allowed in this society. The Prussian's decision to keep the whole group shows that even he understands how determined and strong-willed Miss Rousset is, and that she will only bend to his pressure if the others are suffering because of her kindness and resolve.

The group, still conspiring, finds some bleak humor in all of this. They decide that, in order to leave, they will have to convince Miss Rousset to do the officer's bidding. However, they are determined to present the idea so slyly that Miss Rousset will think she has come up with it herself.

By devising this plan, the group shows that they are cunning and willing to use manipulation to get what they want. This cruel behavior does not match the principled airs that they put on during the rest of the trip.

During lunch, this plan takes form. Mrs. Loiseau, Mrs. Carré-Lamadon, and the Countess are kind to Miss Rousset only to "increase her docility and her confidence in their council." The group talks an awful lot about sacrifice, and over and over they reiterate that sacrifice is perfect and natural and expected, especially of a woman in society. But Miss Rousset once again says no to the innkeeper when he comes down to pose the usual question before dinner.

Again, this intentional and calculated manipulation demonstrates the wealthier travelers' true character. It is especially jarring to see the Count and Mrs. Carré-Lamadon use Miss Rousset's trust in them against her; it reaffirms the slight power these two women have socially, and how they are fine with using this power only to solidify the class hierarchy.

Spirits plummet. No one in the group knows what to do. The Countess, who has no more useful dialogue about duty, absently asks the nuns to tell a religious story. Although they'd not been part of any of the earlier conversations, the two women tell a story that "len[ds] a formidable support to the conspiracy." They choose to talk about Abraham blindly following orders because of faith. The Countess seizes this opportunity and summarizes: "the need justifies the means."

Here, the nuns' religious zeal ultimately causes Miss Rousset's resolve to break—an ironic twist, as religion is Miss Rousset's undoing rather than her salvation. Maupassant is clearly illustrating the limits of what faith can do for a person. When the Countess easily manipulates the moral of the story to apply it directly to Miss Rousset's predicament, she shows her true colors; she'll not only sell Miss Rousset out, but also use the devotion of others as a vehicle to get what she wants.

The group goes to bed and wakes late in the afternoon the next day. They all go for a walk. The Count takes Miss Rousset's arm and speaks to her in a tone that is at once "paternal," "familiar," and "a little disdainful." He tries both flattery and guilt, telling Miss Rousset how lucky the officer would be to sleep with such a pretty woman, but also making it clear that it is cruel of her to allow the rest of the group to remain hostages. That night, Miss Rousset does not come down for dinner.

The Count expects Miss Rousset to bend to his wishes, because he is a figure of power and influence. By trying to flatter her while also subtly calling her cruel, the Count, like his wife before him, clearly has no specific belief and will do whatever it takes to get Miss Rousset to change her mind.

Everyone is ecstatic. Mr. Loiseau cries out that he will "pay for the champagne." The group becomes "communicative and buoyant." They fill with joy. Everyone compliments each other, admires each other, and starts to drink heavily. Even the nuns share in a toast. Cornudet is the only traveler not wildly partying, and he leaves the room in a huff towards the end of the night. Mr. Loiseau calls Cornudet's discontent "very green," and he tells the others about Miss Rousset's rejection of Cornudet. The Count and Mr. Carré-Lamadon double over in laughter.

The group's cheer is horrifying, as they've literally just sacrificed a woman who has been nothing but kind to them and they are celebrating her downfall for their benefit. The intensity of everyone's happiness is juxtaposed with the likely suffering that Miss Rousset must be going through at the same time in the very same building. Cornudet not participating in the celebration warms the reader to him slightly, but Mr. Loiseau suggests that Cornudet is mostly just jealous that Miss Rousset wouldn't sleep with him. *Again, when the wealthy Count and Mr. Carré-Lamadon find Miss Rousset's fate hilarious instead of tragic, they are removing the masks of genteel civility and showing their true colors.*

Later that night, Mrs. Loiseau says to Mr. Loiseau: "some women will take to a uniform, whether it be French or Prussian. It is all the same to them! What a pity!"

The cruel irony of Mrs. Loiseau's statement is clear because Miss Rousset desperately did not want to sleep with the officer. Even after doing what the group wanted her to do, Miss Rousset is looked down on and scorned.

The next morning, the carriage is ready and waiting for the travelers. A cold and sunny day greets nine passengers, all packed and ready to go; the group waits only on Miss Rousset. When she arrives, she looks flustered. She approaches the Countess—and the Count leads his wife away from Miss Rousset immediately. Miss Rousset tries to greet Mrs. Carré-Lamadon but she is met with silence. The group acts as though she is not there, refusing to look in her direction, acting like she has "some infectious disease."

By not looking at or speaking to Miss Rousset, the wealthier travelers are treating her even worse than when she first arrived in the carriage. This proves that all previous acts of kindness were just aberrations. Maupassant uses the image of an "infectious disease" to describe Miss Rousset because the wealthier travelers see her—and by extension all those of a lower social class—as things to be avoided for their own well-being.

The carriage moves towards Le Havre with an atmosphere of cold awkwardness. The Countess turns to Mrs. Carré-Lamadon and, breaking the silence, asks about a society friend of theirs. The women chatter about other ladies, and the married men talk more of money.

The empty talk between the wealthier women is, once again, designed to exclude and even punish Miss Rousset. Maupassant reminds the reader of the shallow way that these wealthier travelers choose to see the world—and how no act of kindness or sacrifice will shatter social hierarchy.

As the nuns lower their heads and pray, the carriage moves on. Mr. Loiseau declares that he is hungry and his wife takes out a large basket of food which they share. The Count and Countess follow suit. Soon nine travelers are all eating the **food** that they have brought—everybody except Miss Rousset, who forgot to pack since she was in a hurry. Nobody will share—nobody even looks at her. Although she tries desperately to prevent it, Miss Rousset starts to quietly cry.

The other travelers eating right in front of Miss Rousset and refusing to share shows how this time she has to rely on their *generosity, and it is finally clear they have none. This moment is akin to a test that every single character fails. Their cruelty could have been limited to simply ignoring Miss Rousset, but Maupassant employs the image of a basket of food to emphasize that it is not only social kindness these characters withhold from Miss Rousset, but all of their resources as well. Maupassant shows that, in the carriage (as in life), people from a lower class cannot rely on the goodwill of people in higher social positions.*

Mrs. Loiseau mutters that Miss Rousset "weeps for shame." Then Cornudet begins to hum the French national anthem. The carriage grows dark, as nobody is interested in hearing the song. The carriage rolls on towards Le Havre as Cornudet keeps whistling and Miss Rousset continues to weep.

The social hierarchy of the carriage now matches the one outside of it, just like the wealthier characters always wanted. Miss Rousset is weeping because she is devastated by her companions' hypocrisy, but Mrs. Loiseau's statement shows that the others refuse to acknowledge this insincerity in themselves. By whistling the national anthem, the ostracized Cornudet is shaming Miss Rousset, who has just slept with an adversary, as well as the rest of the carriage, who've betrayed their country by bending to the will of the Prussian officer. Maupassant one last time shows the tragedy of his story: that kindness and virtue cannot overcome money and status in such a hierarchical society.

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