

## Proper Names in Maupassant's Short Stories

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### Abstract

In his numerous novels and short stories, Guy de Maupassant used an enormous number of proper names, some of which were his own invention. He used a variety of methods to create names, and he used names in various ways, ranging from comical to significant narrative purposes.

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In the ten years of his active literary career, Guy de Maupassant (1850–93) published twenty-seven volumes of novels, novellas, and short stories. As regards composition, this enormous output raised, of course, both literary and technical problems. These have greatly intrigued the critics who, over the years, have widely discussed most of the thematic aspects, as well as the structural and stylistic techniques used by this writer who produced so regularly and abundantly. It is therefore surprising to note that proper names – a most common and frequently recurring element – have not yet been examined, although, being an essential component of the work, they probably preoccupied Maupassant every time he began a new story. If we take into consideration the fact that a short story has an average of two or three characters (often more) and that he has written hundreds of them, we shall see that this aspect must have been a constant and sometimes an urgent problem for him.

How does a writer choose his or her characters' names? Critics rarely devote a moment's thought to it, readers even less. Most readers no doubt accept Emma Bovary's or Anna Karenina's name as naturally as that of any new acquaintance in real life, disregarding the fact that real people's names are imposed on them, while in fiction the writer is free to choose among an infinity of potential names.

There is little information about Maupassant's method in assigning names to his characters. Like other writers, he must have used many names he knew or heard about. We know, though, that he had difficulties in naming the English spinster who, on someone else's suggestion, finally became Miss Harriet. We also see that Yveline Samoris was renamed Yvette when the story was reworked into the novella *Yvette*.

In some cases, a reader well acquainted with Maupassant's works is able to detect his impatience with the task of finding given names, as well as family names.<sup>1</sup> However, the problem is solved easily enough, first by picking the most common French names, then by using them again and again. *Jeanne* is one of his favorite women's names (*Une vie*, "La Dot," "La Moustache," "Réveil," "Le Petit," to name a few works in which this name is used). There are also several *Mathildes* (e.g., in "La Parure," "Le Vengeur," "Une soirée," "Le Mal d'André"), *Berthes* ("Une Ruse," "La Rouille," "La Bûche"), *Sophies* ("Mots d'amour," "La Dot"), occasionally *Louise* and *Pauline* ("Mademoiselle Perle"), *Irma* ("Le Lit 29"), *Gilberte* ("La Relique"), *Julie* ("Julie Romain"). As for men, there are numerous *Pierres* and *Jeans* (*Pierre et Jean*, "L'Attente," "Le Petit", etc.), *Pauls* ("Monsieur Parent," "La Femme de Paul," *Mont-Oriol*), *Georges* ("Monsieur Parent," "L'Epave"), *Jules* ("Un Réveillon"), *Julien* ("La Bûche"), etc. The writer even used the name of his manservant, François Tassart,<sup>2</sup> slightly disguised as *François Tessier* (in "Le Père"). Although "Le Père" is a serious story, this choice of the protagonist's name was certainly intended as a private joke between Maupassant and those of his readers who knew him personally. As we shall see later, he thoroughly enjoyed this kind of joke. In this particular case, however, he reveals considerable cynicism, since "Le Père" – the story of a man who abandoned his illegitimate son because he did not want to marry the mother – reflects his own private life, not his servant's.

It is worth mentioning in this context that, however pressing the need for names, Maupassant generally avoided the given names in his own family (*Guy*, *Gustave* – his father's and also Flaubert's first name – *Laura*, his mother's, and *Hervé*, his brother's names).<sup>3</sup>

While Christian or first names were readily available, family names seem to constitute a more difficult problem. Certainly, Maupassant had only to look around in order to find some, but in most cases he simply invented them, showing a distinct preference for common French words, especially nouns, with or without the definite article and/or a preposition. Typical examples: *Loiseau* 'the bird' (in *Boule de Suif*), *Loisel* 'the bird' (in "La Parure"), *Pinson* 'finch' and *Patience* 'patience' (in "L'Ami Patience"), *Lelièvre* 'the hare,' *Bonnet* 'the cap,' and *Ledentu* 'the mouthful of teeth' (in "Une Ruse"), *Souris* 'mouse' ("Le Vengeur"), *Source* 'fountainhead' ("L'Orphelin"), *Pavilion* 'pavilion' ("Misère humaine"), *Lechapelier* 'the hatmaker' ("Première neige"), *Chicot* 'stub, stump' ("Le Petit fût," "L'An"), *Templier* 'templar' ("Nuit de Noël"), *Oreille* 'ear' ("Le Parapluie"), *Savon* 'soap' ("L'Héritage"), *Coutelier* 'cutler' ("A cheval"), *Chenal* 'channel' (*Miss Harriet*), *Chenet* 'andiron' ("En famille"),

'of the bush' ("Un duel"), *Duvert* 'of the green' and *Dupuis* (*du puits*) 'of the well' (*La Maison Tellier*), *Dufour* 'of the oven' ("Une partie de campagne"), *Duclos* 'of the close' ("Le Port"), *Duval* 'of the valley' ("Le Vengeur"), *Desbarres* 'of the bars' ("Le Rosier de madame Husson"), *Duchoux* 'of the cabbage' ("Duchoux"), *Lévesque* 'the bishop' ("Le Retour"), and *Dumoulin* 'of the mill' ("Deux amis").

Maupassant's premise in creating names is—quite rightly—that anything goes and is therefore permissible in this field. From the noun alone he sometimes moves boldly to whole syntagms: *Bonnefille* 'good girl' (*Mont Oriol*), *Bonenfant* 'good child' ("Le Baptême") or *Bonnenfant* ("Opinion publique"), *Bontemps* 'fine weather' ("Le Diable"). However, while these are all plausible creations, others strike the reader as very strange.<sup>4</sup> Such is the case of *Follenvie*, in "Boule de Suif", of *Malautour* 'evil around' ("Le Crime au père Boniface"), *Belloncle* 'handsome uncle' ("Ce cochon de Morin"), *Mongilet* 'my vest' ("Le père Mongilet"), *Epivent* 'ear of corn-wind' ("Le Lit 29"), *Cachelin* 'hides linen' and *Torcheboeuf* 'wipes the ox' ("L'Héritage"). The result is often comic and, rather obviously, is one of Maupassant's devices for ridiculing the characters. *Labarbe* 'what a bore!' (in colloquial French) appears twice: once applied to a doctor (doctors often have funny names in these works) in *La Petite Roque* and once again in "Ce cochon de Morin." In "Le Vengeur" M. Leuillet (*l'oeillet* 'pink' [the flower]) marries Mme. Souris. *Oreille* is also intended to make fun of the woman who bears it ("Le Parapluie"). There is also a *Tonnelet* 'little barrel' in "Ce cochon de Morin," a *Piston* 'piston' in "Opinion publique," and an Abbé *Ceinture* 'belt' in "Le Protecteur," a story with a farcical plot. But it is "L'Héritage" which sets the record, with almost all characters bearing caricatural names: *Torcheboeuf*, *Cachelin*, *Savon*, *Lesable*, and *Pitolet* (which evokes the word *pistolet* spoken by someone having trouble pronouncing *s*). This collection of ridiculous names probably reflects the dislike and contempt the writer had conceived for the civil service over the few miserable years he had himself spent at the Navy Ministry (where the action of "L'Héritage" takes place).

There is abundant evidence that Maupassant liked to play with words and names both in his works and in his private life. As a young man, he used to give his friends funny nicknames, the most remarkable of which was "*N'a qu'un Oeil*" 'has but one eye,' referring to one who wore a monocle. His letters to them were signed *Joseph Prunier* 'plum-tree.'<sup>5</sup>

Maupassant's fondness for linguistic games found an easier outlet in names than in any other field of literary creation: it enabled him, above all, to amuse himself (as in the case of *Tassart/Tessier*) even in his most serious works. It is in his short stories that he is completely at ease, feeling

free of any inhibitions he might have had in the novels. Indeed, although the former heavily outnumber the latter, Maupassant liked to think of himself as a novelist, and therefore was much more careful (too careful perhaps) in what he believed to be his “serious” works (as opposed to the “trifles”). These games are not completely absent in the novels, but are practiced on a lesser scale and only with secondary or episodic characters. By contrast, the short story served for him as a field for literary experimentation: it is the continual search for new patterns that finally led him to regard the names as a potentially significant element of the narrative. He began by choosing proper names whose intrinsic meaning fits in with the content of the story. Thus, in the well-known “La Parure,” M. and Mme. Loisel, condemned to a lifetime of drudgery in order to pay for a lost diamond necklace, live in the *rue des Martyrs*. The street name reappears in “Les Bijoux,” where the main character, M. Lantin — another martyr — suffers excruciating pain when he discovers that his beloved late wife had been unfaithful to him. Patience, in “L’Ami Patience,” had been patient indeed, saving money year after year by forcing his wife to prostitute herself, in order to achieve his dream: a successful brothel situated in a street which, incidentally, is called *Le-Coq-qui-chante!* La mère Sauvage (in “La Mère Sauvage”) is savage indeed. Rosalie Prudent, in the eponymous story, is an unmarried servant who finds herself pregnant in an unhappy love affair. Resolved to keep the illegitimate child, she tries to foresee all possible implications of giving birth in secret under the roof of her bourgeois employers. Ironically, when everything seems ready, the one unexpected thing happens: she is delivered of twins and in despair kills them both. Monsieur Parent, an adoring father, discovers one day that his wife has been unfaithful to him from the very beginning of their marriage and that his beloved Georges is not really his son. *Mademoiselle Perle’s* is not a name, but a well-deserved nickname as she — a charity-raised foundling — proves a better and nobler person than any member of the bourgeois family which had adopted her.

The choice of names seems more obvious to us, modern readers, than it was to Maupassant’s Parisian contemporary. The street name *Rue des Martyrs* is a good example. There was at that time — in fact there still is — a rue de Martyrs in Paris. It is still mentioned in relation to the Impressionists who used to meet at the Café des Martyrs in the early 1860s. Later on, Pissarro’s parents moved to the Boulevard des Martyrs. Maupassant’s contemporaries did not think of the actual meaning of the word any more than we associate nuns with the rue des Ursulines or monks with the rue des Récollets or des Bénédictins. If there is an ulterior motive behind the naming of the street (and knowing Maupassant, one can safely assume

there is), it appeared more subtle at the time than it does today in the eyes of the modern French or foreign reader.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Maupassant used a whole set of camouflage techniques for these significant names. The most common was recourse to existing names with an intrinsic meaning: *Patience*, *Prudent*, *Parent* are all real-life, not uncommon patronymics. It is interesting, however, to observe that the writer avoided matching the grammatical gender of the name with the character's sex. For example, although the noun *Prudence* is a well-known Christian name, Maupassant preferred the less conspicuous last name *Prudent* ("Rosalie Prudent"), which is the masculine form of the corresponding adjective. Conversely, he used *Patience* ("L'Ami Patience") rather than the masculine *Patient*, which also exists as a family name. As for *Parent*, in addition to being even more common than the other two,<sup>7</sup> its symbolism is partly masked by the fact that the singular *parent* in the English sense of the word does not exist in French and consequently becomes synonymous with "father" only when considered phonetically.

A name with a phonetical meaning denied by the spelling is indeed another common device in Maupassant's stories. Although it may sometimes figure as a minor joke (there is a soldier called *Siballe* [*six balles* 'six bullets'] in "Le Remplaçant," a *Boissel* [*boit sel* 'drinks salt'] in "L'Héritage" and a *Péronel* [*péronelle* 'stupid and talkative woman'] in "Le Réveil"), it mainly appears in works where it serves as a significant element of the overall structure. Thus, in "Le Père Mongilet" there is a M. Boivin (*boit vin* 'drinks wine') whose wife beats him every time he gets drunk (while, conversely, he is driven to drink because she terrorizes him). In "La Ficelle," the main character's name, *Hauchecorne* (*hoche corne* 'shakes corn') fits in with the initial general description of the Norman peasants' bestiality.<sup>8</sup> (In "Aux champs" another peasant family is called *Tuvache* 'you, cow!') The villain of the story, on the other hand, is one Malandain (*malandrin* 'thief, scoundrel'). "L'Aveu" presents a silly, naive peasant girl, Céleste (celestial), in contrast with her shrewd, mistrustful mother, la mere Malivoire (*mal y voir* 'to see evil'). In "Denis," the main character sues a neighbor called Malois (*ma loi* 'my law') and wins! M. Lerebour (*a rebours* 'backward') in "La Serre" is an elderly man who, all of a sudden, experiences a renewal of physical desire and virility. In "Promenade," le père Leras (le rat),<sup>9</sup> a poor and lonely man who has spent forty miserable years as a clerk at the firm of Labuse (*l'abus* 'the abuse' or *la bouse* 'dung?') & Cie, discovers one day that he has nothing more to expect from life and commits suicide. The name *Leras* is a clear hint at the French expression *rat de bibliothèque* 'bookworm' and, indeed, Leras' job was to keep the account books of the firm.

Are these obscuring devices successful? Considering how little this aspect of Maupassant's creativity has been discussed to date, the answer seems to be yes. However, once the meaning of the character's name is noticed, and the link with the events of the plot established, the writer's intention becomes obvious and the reader tends, accordingly, to reinterpret the narrative in the light of this newly discovered element. The results are sometimes surprising. Rosalie Prudent's story, for instance, in addition to being a criticism of social injustice, suddenly illustrates a more general truth: no one, no matter how "prudent," can possibly foresee everything; man is but the plaything of fortune.

If *la mère Sauvage* (in "La mère Sauvage") is savage indeed, M. Sauvage in "Deux amis" is, with his friend Morissot, the very opposite of a savage in a savage world. Is Monsieur Parent<sup>10</sup> an unhappy father whose beloved son was torn away from him or a narrow-minded, ungenerous man who abandons his child because he has come to doubt his paternity? Indeed, the most interesting instances are not those which back the general meaning of the story, but rather those which challenge the too-easy first impression and invite a reevaluation of the text.

Thus, from one stage to another, Maupassant's manipulation of names leads to remarkable effects from the linguistic as well as the literary point of view. It restores in the proper name—usually reduced to a mere label—its initial semantic charge, thereby enabling it to assume a function in the overall syntax of the work. Moreover, in some cases, it points to possible reinterpretation of the narrative, thereby helping to unveil the basic ambiguity which is, indeed, a characteristic of Maupassant's best short stories.

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## Notes

1. Whenever it is possible to avoid names or if naming is not absolutely necessary, Maupassant dispenses with names, especially for secondary characters. The first person narrator is often anonymous. A number of fantastic stories (e.g., "La Nuit," "Fou?" *Sur l'eau*, "La Chevelure") and more rarely, other works ("Idylle," "Au printemps") actually do not contain a single name.

2. This François Tassart was himself quite a character. He stayed ten years in Maupassant's service and after the writer's death wrote a highly controversial book about him.

3. The only exceptions are a little girl called *Laurine* in *Bel-Ami* and a *Gustave* in "La Serre." The latter is mentioned only once in the whole story (when Mme. Lerebour calls her husband by his given name) and easily passes unnoticed by an inattentive reader. It is

possible that the use of this name in this particular story is intended as a joke between the author and his father, since the personage called *Gustave* is an elderly man who, all of a sudden, rediscovers the joys of sexual intercourse. This fits in quite well with what we know about Maupassant's relationship with his father. When the writer composed a pornographic play and gave a private performance of it (with himself in the cast), he did not hesitate to invite both his father and Flaubert, although the text and action were so obscene that no woman was invited or allowed to attend the performance.

4. The names are strange, however, only semantically. The creations violating morphology (as *Belloncle* or *Bonnenfant*, whose spelling seems to associate feminine adjectives with masculine nouns) or syntax (*Epivent*—a juxtaposition of two nouns, or *Tuvache*, instead of the vocative *toi-vache*) are definite exceptions.

5. Maupassant uses these names in his story "Mouche."

6. Still, even today, the actual existence of this well-known Paris street proves an effective camouflage device, as shown by the following example. In an article entitled "Noms et destin dans *La Parure*," Gerald Prince endeavors to find symbols in all the characters' names—*Mathilde*, *Forestier*, even *Ramponneau*—and, through either their intrinsic meaning or their sound, to establish them as supportive elements to the global message of the story. There is only one name he does not discuss ("... it might be a coincidence," he says): *la rue des Martyrs*, which is much more obviously—too obviously, if anything—evocative of the protagonists' destiny.

7. There are around 170 *Parents* in the telephone directory of Paris and its environs today.

8. See Jenny 267–68: "The proper name, always created or chosen by the author, is often a pretext for connotations which guide [our] moral appreciation [of the character in question]. This is ... the case in this story ... where Hauchecorne appears from the beginning as a being still rooted in hesitant, if not malignant, bestiality—in other words a 'brave bête.' [And] a single letter needs to be changed in his enemy's name—*Malandrain*—in order to reveal his real 'malandrin' nature: a scoundrel." (My translation.)

9. *Lerat* is a common French name and the fact that Maupassant decided in favor of a different spelling proves our point.

10. "... *Parent*, a name so well chosen," comments P. Reboul in a footnote to the story (Maupassant, *Contes* 269). The comment is certainly justified, but is the name intended literally or ironically?

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