# *MAUPASSANT'S BEST SHORT-STORIES: SOME NOTES ON AN ANONYMOUS WORDSWORTH CLASSICS TRANSLATION*

**Daniela Hăisan, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava**

*Abstract: Maupassant earned international renown with collections of stories that have been edited and reedited over and over again in different configurations. As Emmanuèle Grandadam pointed out in her Poétique du recueil (1970), the criteria behind the selection of short-stories to make up a volume are more often than not obscure, ranging from vaguely thematic to purely subjective. We are going to infer what allowed Wordsworth Classics to label seventeen of Maupassant's short-stories as 'the very best' and to deliberately omit the name of the translator of these stories from French into English. Furthermore, we are going to analyse the English versions from the point of view of lay-out, titles, deictics, affective language and other stylistic quirks.*

*Keywords: translation, affective, deictics, free indirect speech.*

Wordsworth Editions was launched in 1987 with the aim of providing invaluable books for students by remarketing the classic paperback, more to the point by offering high quality books to readers on a tight budget. While literally cheap, these books strive to make culture more accessible without totally sacrificing some sort of scholastic pretence. Introductions and Notes are included in the vast majority of the titles in the Adult Classics and World Literature Series, written by leading academics; Further Reading Lists are also included (although Wikipedia is, among other links, also considered). We are going to focus on a Wordsworth Classics edition of Maupassant's fiction dated 2011 (previous edition, 1997) that, surprisingly for these days, omits the name of the translator of Maupassant's works from French into English. The volume, entitled *Maupassant's Best Short-Stories*, contains seventeen tales that are considered representative for the French writer's style: *Boule de Suif*, *Two Friends*, *Madame Tellier's Establishment*, *Mademoiselle Fifi*, *Clair de Lune*, *Miss Harriet*, *The Necklace*, *Mademoiselle Pearl*, *The Piece of String*, *Madame Husson's 'Rosier'*, *That Pig of a Morin*, *Useless Beauty*, *The Olive Orchard*, *A Deal*, *Love*, *Two Little Soldiers*, *Happiness*.

In his Preface to Emmanuèle Grandadam's *Contes et nouvelles de Maupassant : pour une poétique du recueil* (2007), Phillipe Hamon enumerates the classic textual, peritextual and paratextual methods of ensuring homogeneity to 19th-century short-story collections (which Maupassant, for one, had rarely used), such as: recurrent characters from a story to another; a Decameron-like frame; a preface or a motto functioning as a bonding agent for the selected stories or giving the volume a global, homogenizing title. Hamon also emphasizes that the choice of particular stories that make up a volume is by no means a haphazard one when it comes to the possible effect on the readers – an effect of sheer manipulation as they might feel compelled to automatically search for a sense of continuity and for affinities between the texts.



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

In reality, the criteria behind the selection of short-stories to make up a volume are more often than not obscure, ranging from vaguely thematic to purely subjective. Emmanuèle Grandadam shows that the thematic criterion was, surprisingly, not among the most important in making up collections, even in Maupassant's time, and that sometimes Maupassant contented himself with gathering the more recent works he had published in newspapers and magazines and offering them as such to this or that publishing house to handle at their own will, or so it seems. It is also equally true that other times Maupassant sent lists of titles he expected the editor to obey and that he used to get involved in choosing liminary, introductory tales (see *Miss Harriet* for instance, as proven by a letter dating back to March 6 1884 to Havard, his editor at the time), but generally speaking his collections tend to lack unity or some kind of underlying principle. When it comes to collections of Best Short-Stories however, there is an implicit statement that the selection was made starting from a premise of either quality or of commercial success. The seventeen short-stories included in the Wordsworth Classics edition we analyse come from twelve different collections, some eponymous (*Mademoiselle Fifi*, *Miss Harriet*, *Le Horla*, *La Maison Tellier*, *Contes de la bécasse*, *Contes du jour et de la nuit*, *Clair de Lune*, *L'Inutile Beauté*, *La Petite Roque*, *Monsieur Parent*, *Le rosier de Madame Husson*, *Les soirées de Médan*). According to Cedric Watts, who signs the *Introduction*, the 'many' tales in the volume 'illustrate well Maupassant's distinctive combination of qualities as a story-writer. These include: a lucid, proficient style, deft and generally unobtrusive; strongly ironic plotting; swiftly incisive characterisation; sharply detailed descriptions; sympathy for the kind-hearted, particularly for genial prostitutes or brothel-bosses; varying degrees of scepticism towards religion and some of its representatives contempt for the middle class's hypocrisy (depicted sometimes as widespread, sometimes as localised); and disgust at the wastefulness and cruelty of war.' (p. x) As a matter of fact, while pretending to account for the choice of tales on the basis of literary quality only, the author of the *Introduction* manages to identify some common themes as well, such as war, love, nature, religion, hypocrisy, prostitution and acknowledging how 'a life may be ruined by a brief incident and the interpretation or misinterpretation of it.' (p. xiv) (a sombre recognition which becomes apparent in at least three of the literary pieces included in the volume, namely *The Piece of String*, *The Necklace* and *That Pig of a Morin*.)

While one would expect the tales to be arranged more or less chronologically so as to better emphasize a possible linearity in Maupassant's honing his skills as a writer, one notices that they are, instead, only roughly (chrono)logical (1879, 1882, 1881, 1882, 1882, 1883, 1884, 1886, 1883, 1887, 1882, 1890, 1890, 1884, 1886, 1885, 1884). Judging by the distribution of the years the respective stories appeared in the press first (before appearing in collections), however, we cannot help but notice that 1882-1884 must have been a very prolific, creative time in Maupassant's life. For what's worth, at least some of the tales included in the Wordsworth Classics collection under debate here have been, statistically, published and translated a good many times more than others: *Boule de Suif*, *The Necklace*, *La Maison Tellier*, *Miss Harriet*, to name but a few. Then again, the horror story *Le Horla*, which is always top of the list, was deliberately omitted from this selection, which is, again, difficult to account for.

Cedric Watts' *Introduction* starts with two quotations (translated into English by Julie Mead in 2001 for Oxford University Press), one of which from Maupassant himself (The Preface to one of his novels, *Pierre et Jean*):



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

'Talent is a lengthy patience. It is a question of looking at anything you want to express long enough and closely enough to discover in it something that nobody else has seen enough. [...] The most insignificant thing contains something of the unknown. Let us find it.'

The other quotation is from Joseph Conrad, assessing Maupassant (essay 'Guy de Maupassant' in *Notes on Life and Letters*, Dent, London, 1949, p. 29):

'What is wanting to his universal success is the mediocrity of an obvious and appealing tenderness. He neglects to qualify his truth with the drop of facile sweetness; he forgets to strew paper roses over the tombs.'

Moreover, right after Further Reading and before the actual literary text begins, lies a motto from M. H. Abrams (with no source but the year: 1985):

'This spareness in the narrative often gives the artistry in a good short story visibility than the artistry in the more capacious and loosely structured novel.'

What the author of the Introduction tries to do is thus offer guidelines for the gullible reader who should never fall for critical clichés purporting Maupassant displays indifference and offers no social comment nor moral judgement (p. x). As a matter of fact, Maupassant's detractors are proven wrong by some extracts from *Boule de Suif* which make provocatively explicit moral comments: 'Long-bearded democrats of [Cornudet's] type have a monopoly of patriotism, just as priests have a monopoly of religion [...].' (p. xi) The Introduction also emphasizes that Maupassant is by no means a cynic and that '[t]hough Joseph Conrad felt that Maupassant lacked ''tenderness'', the very lack of tenderness in human relationships is what the tales often deplore.' (p. xiii) Readers are also instructed that *Boule de Suif* is the most successful of Maupassant's tales, deemed by Flaubert a masterpiece (p. x), and that the final paragraphs of his tales are often (though not always) 'morally reticent', leaving the reader to supply concluding moral generalisations, the *implicit* judgements thus notably exceeding the *explicit* judgements (p. xii).

What is most striking about the paratextual side of the book is that, as mentioned previously, there is apparently no information as to who actually translated the tales from French into English.

If the very concept of translation was, in Maupassant's time, rather loose and therefore, to be treated circumspectly (as pseudo-translations as well as pseudo-originals were looming around every corner, title pages used to be incomplete and often omitted the name of the translators unless they were famous), nowadays, not mentioning the name of translator or assuming it is implicit, as if by default, is quite clearly an exceptional case. The primary source, the so-called original version the translation was made after, is also omitted.

Otherwise, the anonymous translation is one of the best, be it a little on the domesticating side, and the selection of tales does give an innocent reader a taste of Maupassant with his penchant for naturalism whether he engages in depicting the Norman peasant life, the Franco-Prussian war or the French bourgeoisie. Making use of a simple, precise but powerful language, the translator does his/her best to restore the clarity, economy, irony and vivid sensuousness of Maupassant's fiction by preserving the textural density and rendering into English as many stylistic shifts as possible.

Before making some observations regarding the way Maupassant's stylistic quirks have been (successfully or not) dealt with in translation, we cannot overlook the fact that, no



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

matter what primary source was used, the page layout and the general configuration of the text was not preserved in the Wordsworth Classics edition. If in the original, the tales are generally sequenced and there are either blank spaces or numbers or bullets to signpost the hiatuses, in the 2011 English version the text is economically organised in fluid, uninterrupted single textual pieces. In order to compensate for these necessary pauses, the translator sometimes interposes temporal deictics, as in the following example taken from *The Necklace*:

*La parure*: [textual pause] Mme Loisel connut la vie horrible des nécessiteux. (1885 : 77-78)
*The Necklace*: **Thereafter** Madame Loisel knew the terrible existence of the needy. (2011: 98)

**Thereafter** replaces a mark in the original text which divides the text into several sections, but the lack of graphic correspondence cannot always be fully redressed and many scenes or gaps remain undistinguishable.

When it comes to the titles, the general strategy seems to be that of sticking to the original(s), up to the point of transferring them as such (see *Boule de Suif*, which literally means 'ball of tallow' and has been translated as 'Dumpling', 'Roly-Poly', 'Butterball', 'Ball of Fat', 'Ball of Lard' etc., but in the present translation we have the original, French title; also, *Clair de Lune*). It is true that most of them are quite simple, containing proper names (*Miss Harriet*, *Mademoiselle Fifi*, *Mademoiselle Pearl* etc.) or common words (*Deux amis / Two friends*, *Amour / Love*, *Le bonheur / Happiness* etc.). However, *That Pig of a Morin* for *Ce cochon de Morin* is worth mentioning for the exact structure it uses; also, *Madame Tellier's Establishment* for *La Maison Tellier* ('establishment' having the same vagueness and the same generic flavour of respectability as 'maison', ironically far from the brothel it actually sympathetically designates). Last but not least, *Petit soldat* is rendered by *Two Little Soldiers*, the use of the plural making the title more explicit.

When translating prose, it is vital to track the syntactic movement of the text. We cannot but agree with Burton Raffel when he says:

'...prose cannot be adequately translated without close attention to its inner structures: for proper prose translation the necessary ans desirable freedoms of the poetic translator must be curbed, for the basic component of prose style, as well as an important aspect of prose significance (meaning), turns out to be syntax.' (1994: x)

Here is a fairly long sentence in *Petit Soldat* [Two Little Soldiers] which proves, among many others, the translator's receptivity to sinuous, half-elliptic syntax:

*Petit soldat*: Et quand ils avaient déjeuné, mangé leur pain jusqu'à la dernière miette, et bu leur vin jusqu'à la dernière goutte, ils demeuraient assis dans l'herbe côte à côte, sans rien dire, les yeux au loin, les paupières lourdes, les doigts croisés comme à la messe, leurs jambes rouges allongées à côté des coquelicots du champ; **et le cuir de leur shakos et le cuivre de leurs boutons luisaient sous le soleil ardent, faisaient s'arrêter les alouettes qui chantaient en planant sur leur tête.** (1910: 291)
*Two Little Soldiers*: When their last crumb of bread **had been eaten** and the last drop of wine **had been drunk**, they stretched themselves out on the grass side by side, without



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

speaking, their half-closed eyes looking away in the distance, their hands clasped as in prayer, their **red-trousered** legs mingling with the bright colours of the **wild flowers**. (2011: 188)

However, one may also notice that the last part of the sentence, namely 'et le cuir de leur shakos et le cuivre de leurs boutons luisaient sous le soleil ardent, faisaient s'arrêter les alouettes qui chantaient en planant sur leur tête' was omitted, that 'wild flowers' is but a hyperonym for 'coquelicot' [poppy] and that 'red-trousered legs' is more explicit than 'jambes rouges'. Not to mention the different tone the use of the passive voice ('had been eaten', 'had been drunk') gives, while keeping the original parallelism intact.

Maupassant's free indirect style (a technique he undoubtedly adopted from Flaubert) along with the use of deictics and affective adjectives and adverbs to create emotional imagery are among his most obvious stylistic trademarks. One of the most connotative personal pronouns he employs is *on*, whose ambiguity and therefore semantic richness is thoroughly exploitable particularly in instances of free indirect discourse. Highly flexible and subjective, this pronoun (which may replace *je, tu, ils, elles, les gens* [I, you, they, the people]) is both generic and specific and seems to make first, second and third person quite undistinguishable. In the following example from *La parure* [The Necklace], an entire series of *on* engenders syntactic parallelism:

*La parure*: Mme Loisel connut la vie horrible des nécessiteux. Elle prit son parti, d'ailleurs, tout d'un coup, héroiquement. Il fallait payer cette dette effroyable. Elle payerait. **On** renvoya la bonne, **on** changea de logement ; **on** loua sous les toits une mansarde. (1885 : 77-78)

*The Necklace*: Thereafter Madame Loisel knew the terrible existence of the needy. She bore her part, however, with sudden heroism. That dreadful debt must be paid. She would pay it. **They** dismissed their servant; **they** changed their lodgings; **they** rented a garret under a roof. (2011: 98)

In the English version, *they* cannot have the same dramatically ambiguous effect as *on* has in the original text; however, *garret* seems to compensate some of the dramatism, as it sounds a lot more wretched a lodging than a *mansarde* ever would.

Another extract that is profusely equipped with *on* is the one below from *Ce cochon de Morin* [That Pig of a Morin]:

*Ce cochon de Morin*: Eh bien, sache qu'**en 1862 ou 63** Morin alla passer quinze jours à Paris, pour son plaisir, ou ses plaisirs, mais sous prétexte de renouveler ses approvisionnements. Tu sais ce que sont, pour un commerçant de province, quinze jours **de** Paris. Cela **vous** met le feu dans le sang. Tous les soirs des spectacles, des frôlements de femmes, une continuelle excitation d'esprit. **On** devient fou. **On** ne voit plus que danseuses en **maillot**, actrices **décolletées**, jambes rondes, épaules **grasses**, tout cela presque à portée de la main, sans qu'**on** ose ou qu'**on** puisse y toucher. **C'est à peine si on goûte, une fois ou deux, à quelques mets inférieurs.** Et l'**on** s'en va, le cœur encore tout secoué, l'âme émoustillée, avec une espèce de démangeaison de baisers qui **vous** chatouillent les lèvres. (1908: 12)

*That Pig of a Morin*: You must know that **some years ago** Morin went to spend a fortnight in Paris for plasure, or for his pleasures, but under the pretext of renewing his stock, and you also know what a fortnight in Paris means to a country shopkeeper; it fires **his** blood. The theatre every evening, women's dresses rustling up against **you** and continual excitement;



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

**one** goes almost mad with it. **One** sees nothing but dancers in **tights**, actresses in **very low dresses**, round legs, **bare** shoulders, all nearly within the reach of **one**'s hands, without daring, or being able, to touch them. When **one** leaves the city **one**'s heart is still exhilarated by a sort of longing for kisses. (2011: 133)

Here, we notice that *on* is rendered by means of an indefinite *one*, but that is adequate only up to a point: where Maupassant deliberately says 'Cela **vous** met le feu dans le sang.', the conative side of *vous* being of great importance in the context, the English text resorts to a mere concord ('...you also know what a fortnight in Paris means to a country shopkeeper; it fires **his** blood.'). The same with: 'une espèce de démangeaison de baisers qui **vous** chatouillent les lèvres' rendered as '**one**'s heart is still exhilarated by a sort of longing for kisses'. The complexity of *on* can never be fully restored in the target-language but sometimes it is possible to suggest that paradoxical sense of closeness hidden behind detachment.

In the extract above there are also some terms that are not strictly accurate ('tights' for 'maillot', 'very low dresses' for 'décolletées' and 'bare shoulders' for 'épaules grasses'), an omission ('C'est à peine si on goûte, une fois ou deux, à quelques mets inférieurs.') as well as an (inexcusable) approximation ('some years ago' for 'en 1862 ou 63').

Personal pronouns and direct address are definitely not the only option for Maupassant when it comes to obtaining impact on the reader: (contextually or intrinsically) affective adjectives are sometimes twice as efficient in getting the desired perlocutionary effect. One of Maupassant's favourite expressions, 'avoir l'air pauvre', for one, is rendered differently into English. In *La parure* [The Necklace], for instance, Madame Loisel, the female protagonist, repeatedly fears 'avoir l'air pauvre':

*La parure*: Cela m'ennuie de n'avoir pas un bijou, pas une pierre, rien à mettre sur moi. J'aurai **l'air**

**misère** comme tout. J'aimerais presque mieux ne pas aller à cette soirée. (1885: 69)

*The Necklace*: It annoys me not to have a single piece of jewellery, not a single ornament, nothing to put on. I shall look **poverty-stricken**. I would almost rather not go at all. (2011: 95)

*La parure*: ...il n'y a rien de plus humiliant que d'**avoir l'air pauvre** au milieu de femmes riches. (1885: 69)

*The Necklace*: ...there's nothing more humiliating than **looking poor** among other women who are rich. (2011: 95)

While 'looking poor' follows literally the French structure, 'poverty-stricken' is a much more forceful semantically than 'avoir l'air pauvre', perhaps a little too forceful.

Far from being a simple ornament in the text, the adjective is essential in Maupassant's descriptive texts, therefore it must get the attention it deserves in translation. Take, for instance, 'recherchés', one of Maupassant's favourites, repeated several times in *La parure* [The Necklace]. The translator, for some reason, sometimes chooses its first meaning (that of 'rare', 'sought-after', 'in demand', 'desirable'), and sometimes the second ('sophisticated') when, in fact, there should be a unity of meaning just as much as a unity of effect:

*La parure*: Elle songeait aux grands salons vêtus de soie ancienne, aux meubles fins portant des bibelots inestimables, et aux petits salons coquets, parfumés, faits pour la causerie



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)

de cinq heures avec les amis les plus intimes, les hommes connus et **recherchés** dont toutes les femmes envient et désirent l'attention. (1885: 64)

*The Necklace*: She **thought of** long reception halls hung with ancient silk, of the dainty cabinets containing priceless curiosities and of little coquettish perfumed reception rooms made for chatting at five o'clock with intimate friends, with men famous and **sought after**, whom all women envy and whose attention they all desire. (2011: 93)

*La parure*: Elle eût tant désiré plaire, être enviée, être séduisante et **recherchée**. (1885: 65)

*The Necklace*: She would have liked so much to please, to be envied, to be charming, to be **sought after**. (2011: 94)

*La parure*: Tout le monde en [an invitation to the ball] veut ; c'est très **recherché** et on n'en donne pas beaucoup aux employés. (1885: 66)

*The Necklace*: Everyone wants to go; it is very **select**, and they are not giving many invitations to clerks. (2011: 94)

In conclusion, what makes this Wordsworth Classics edition enjoyable is, above all, the fact that Maupassant is, as Harold Bloom used to say, 'marvelously readable' (2004: 12) and the (anonymous) translation manages to convey this quite well – not only when it comes to fluency, but also to 'the deftly precise summoning of detail in the observations of character, location and incident.' (Watts, xii).

**Note:** This contribution is a part of the exploratory research programme **Traduction culturelle et littérature(s) francophones : histoire, réception et critique des traductions, CNCS PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0812 Contract 133/27.10.2011.**

**Corpus**

Maupassant, Guy de, *The Best Short-Stories*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., London, 2011 [1997]

Maupassant, Guy de, 'Ce cochon de Morin', in *Contes de la bécasse*, *Œuvres complètes* de Guy de Maupassant, Louis Conrad, Paris, MDCCCCVIII, pp. 9-34

Maupassant, Guy de, 'La parure', in *Contes du jour et de la nuit*, Marpon et E. Flammarion, Paris, 1885, pp. 63-81

Maupassant, Guy de, 'Petit soldat', in *Monsieur Parent*, *Œuvres complètes* de Guy de Maupassant, Louis Conrad, Paris, MDCCCCX, pp. 185-199

**References**

Bloom, Harold (ed.), *Bloom's Major Short-Story Writers: Guy de Maupassant*, Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia, 2004

Grandadam, Emmanuèle, *Contes et nouvelles de Maupassant : pour une poétique du recueil*, Publications des Universités de Rouen et de Havre, 2007

Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Catherine, *L'énonciation de la subjectivité dans le langage*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2002 [1980]

Raffel, Burton, *The Art of Translating Prose*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Press University Park, 1994



BDD-A22291 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:06 UTC)