



More on the Meaning of "Pierre et Jean"

Author(s): Dzintars Freimanis

Source: *The French Review*, Jan., 1965, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Jan., 1965), pp. 326-331

Published by: American Association of Teachers of French

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/385092>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Association of Teachers of French is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The French Review*

JSTOR

More on The Meaning of “Pierre et Jean”

by Dzintars Freimanis

IN HIS ESSAY “LE ROMAN,” Maupassant tells us that a realistic novelist’s aim is “de nous forcer à penser, à comprendre le sens profond et caché des événements.”¹ Recently, several scholars have tried to rethink the deeper meaning of his *Pierre et Jean*—the novel to which that essay serves as preface.² At the risk of oversimplification, their findings may be summarized as follows: according to Professor Vial, the true significance of the novel is Pierre Roland’s struggle against his “mauvais démons”; according to Professor Sullivan, his doubt and uncertainty; according to Professor Niess, his dispelling of these; according to Professor Sachs, his self-discovery. The latest comer, Professor Grant, while not arguing against the former interpretations, suggests that the true meaning of the book may be the complexity or duality of human nature.³

Although all these scholars have offered valuable insights into Maupassant’s work, it appears that modifications and additions are still desirable, for their studies do not exhaust the possible intentions of Maupassant.

If it is accepted, as Professor Niess maintains, that Maupassant is as capable as Flaubert of having his meaning be carried by the “sous-entendus” and symbols, and that some of the symbols in *Pierre et Jean* hold the key to the novel’s true meaning and to Maupassant’s aims (p. 511), then it is important to decide what Maupassant meant by the one image

¹ *Œuvres complètes de Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1924–1930), XIII, xi. All subsequent quotations from Maupassant are from this volume.

² I am referring to the following studies: André Vial, *Guy de Maupassant et l’art du roman* (Paris: Nizet, 1954); Edward D. Sullivan, *Maupassant the Novelist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Robert J. Niess, “*Pierre et Jean*: some symbols,” *French Review*, May, 1959, 511–519; Murray Sachs, “The Meaning of Maupassant’s *Pierre et Jean*,” *French Review*, January 1961, 244–250; Elliott M. Grant, “On the Meaning of Maupassant’s *Pierre et Jean*,” *French Review*, April 1963, 469–473.

³ Still another scholar should be mentioned here: Pierre Cogny. Although he is not primarily concerned with the meaning of the novel, he implies in his introduction to the Garnier edition that Maupassant has expressed in *Pierre et Jean* his own preoccupations and his pessimism. In particular, Pierre Cogny maintains that Maupassant must have doubted at least subconsciously the legitimacy of his birth and that the suspicions of his protagonist Pierre may be similar to his own. See Guy de Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean, texte établi, avec introduction, notes et relevé de variantes* par Pierre Cogny (Paris: Garnier), 1959.

he invoked most frequently, the fog.⁴ According to Professor Sullivan, he used it to indicate Pierre's uncertainty about his mother's guilt or innocence. Professor Niess accepts this interpretation, arguing, however, that instead of remaining in doubt, Pierre grows to understand the situation clearly.

It is true that Maupassant's descriptions of the fog usually accompany the gropings of Pierre's mind, thereby suggesting, perhaps, at least a temporary uncertainty in his thoughts. However, other aspects of the fog symbol may be found as well. Let us consider, for instance, its function during Pierre's boat ride the day after Jean's party. As Maupassant tells us, Pierre sailed in his *Perle* for three hours, calm and satisfied, dreaming about a pleasant and beautiful future. Suddenly, the old sailor Papagris warned him: "V'la d'la brume, m'sieu Pierre, faut rentrer." But the fog came before they could return:

Lorsqu'elle [la brume] atteignit la Perle, l'enveloppant dans son imperceptible épaisseur, un frisson de froid courut sur les membres de Pierre, et une odeur de fumée et de moisissure, l'odeur bizarre des brouillards marins, lui fit fermer la bouche pour ne point goûter cette nuée humide et glacée. Quand la barque reprit dans le port sa place accoutumée, la ville entière était ensevelie déjà sous cette vapeur menue, qui, sans tomber, mouillait comme une pluie et glissait sur les maisons et les rues à la façon d'un fleuve qui coule (pp. 88–89).

Evidently, this paragraph represents a contrast. The three carefree hours, filled with fresh breeze and sunshine, end abruptly in an unpleasant atmosphere of cold, dampness, and strange odor. Is the reader thus being reminded of Pierre's doubts about the meaning of the barmaid's remark he heard the day before? Perhaps; but, more than casting any *uncertainty* over Pierre's mind, the fog already suggests the type of *certainty* he will eventually achieve: a realization that the world is distasteful and impure.

At dinner table the same day, Pierre inquires more about the old family friend Maréchal whose unusual legacy is weighing on his mind. The information he receives rekindles his suspicion. He goes out again for a lonely walk. This time, the repugnant attributes of the fog have become more striking:

Il sortit de bonne heure et se remit à rôder par les rues. Elles étaient ensevelies sous le brouillard qui rendait pesante, opaque et nauséabonde la nuit. On eût dit une fumée pestilentielle abattue sur la terre. . . . Toutes les mauvaises

⁴ For the sake of convenience, I shall adopt Professor Niess' terminology and speak about "symbols" and "symbolizing," although I am aware that such terms can be applied here in an extended meaning only. Maupassant's symbols are accompanying elements; they suggest and reinforce a state of mind.

odeurs semblaient sortir du ventre des maisons, puanteurs des caves, des fosses, des égouts, des cuisines pauvres, pour se mêler à l'affreuse senteur de cette brume errante (93).

It seems hardly probable that Maupassant chose adjectives like “nauséabonde,” “pestilentielle,” “affreuse” and accumulated all the sickening sources of bad odors starting with “ventre des maisons” merely in order to imply that Pierre is uncertain. True, he is still struggling with his doubts, but he now possesses new evidence, namely, he knows that Maréchal was as kind to him during his early childhood as he was later on to Jean, if not more so. Therefore, Pierre thinks, there must be a special reason why Maréchal chose Jean as his only heir. At the time of this walk, Pierre has come a step closer to his eventual certainty, which will make him disgusted with life; consequently, the fog has now become more disgusting also.

If the fog symbolized Pierre’s lack of knowledge, his uncertainty in the full sense of the word, then its opposite—light—could indeed be expected to signify certainty, as Professor Niess maintains. Yet, this interpretation suffers from the fact that the most detailed and powerful description of light in the whole novel (from “Ayant fait” to “vraies étoiles,” pp. 42–43), which Professor Niess quotes at length (p. 517), occurs as early as in chapter II, when Pierre has just started to speculate about the reasons of the curious legacy; he does not yet have any suspicion, let alone any certainty, about his mother’s guilt. We do not find many more instances where light is mentioned. One other major passage referred to by Professor Niess, the beach scene with the joyful bathers and the implied sunlight (pp. 122–23), serves primarily as a contrast to Pierre’s unhappiness and solitude, rather than to his lack of knowledge. Maupassant tells us: “Pierre marchait au milieu de ces gens, plus perdu, plus séparé d’eux, plus isolé, plus noyé dans sa pensée torturante, que si on l’avait jeté à la mer du pont d’un navire, à cent lieues au large” and, a little further, “une haine surgit en lui contre eux, car ils semblaient heureux et contents” (p. 123). The emphasis here does not fall on Pierre’s certitude, although that is implied also; what the author wishes to make clear is the *result* that Pierre’s increasing lucidity brings him, namely, his painful alienation from the rest of the world. Not only the former descriptions of the fog, but also the light-filled scene on the beach imply the growing repugnance Pierre feels against whatever and whoever may surround him.

It appears possible to conclude that light possesses less symbolic value in this novel than does fog, and that the latter, instead of indicating, above all, Pierre’s doubt and uncertainty, serves to create an atmosphere of unpleasantness and distaste. Since Pierre’s repugnance grows in proportion with his increasing certainty, we may well agree with Professor Niess

that “it is the gradual growth of understanding on his part that is the very core and meaning of *Pierre et Jean*” (p. 513), only we do not accept his contention that one can argue this way because other symbols, notably light, “clearly counterbalance and contradict the fog symbols” (p. 513). Rather, Pierre’s certainty can be inferred from the increasingly oppressive attributes of the fog, and, even more so, from several other indications that Maupassant supplies. Thus, he tells us explicitly that Pierre is struggling not so much against lack of knowledge as against convincing evidence:

Peut-être même [Marowsko] croyait-il que Jean était le fils de Maréchal. Certes il le croyait! Comment ne le croirait-il pas, tant la chose devait paraître vraisemblable, probable, évidente? Mais lui-même, lui Pierre, le fils, depuis trois jours ne luttait-il pas de toute sa force, avec toutes les subtilités de son cœur, pour tromper sa raison (emphasis mine), ne luttait-il pas contre ce soupçon terrible? (pp. 94–95).

If Pierre has to fight so hard in order to deceive his reasoning faculties, then his suspicion has grown almost to a certainty. Maupassant even calls it by that name when he tells us that the following night Pierre was able to sleep but an hour or two, then awoke, began thinking again, and “se sentait traîné par sa logique, comme par une main qui attire et étrangle, vers l’intolérable certitude” (p. 111). And finally, when Pierre bursts out and reveals his secret thoughts to Jean, he does not mention mere doubts, but rather, “il lui dit tout, ses soupçons, ses raisonnements, ses luttes, sa certitude” (p. 176).

In addition to these remarks about the meaning of the fog symbol and the problem of Pierre’s doubts or certainty, the question of his self-discovery should be considered. There is no denying Professor Sachs’ point that Pierre discovers certain truths about himself. However, he finds out more than that, since a good part of his discovery concerns facts outside him. As Professor Sachs states, Pierre comes “face to face with two . . . major cracks in the structure of illusions by which he sustains himself” (p. 249), namely, his jealousy and his false notion of purity, “which is enshrined in his idealized picture of his mother” (p. 248). But only the first of the two “cracks” is caused by a true self-discovery; the cause of the other is external. Pierre does learn something about the illusory nature of purity, but this fact concerns the outside world. If it means new knowledge about himself, then it does so only to the extent that Pierre’s conception of the world is subjective. It has to be such, in order to agree with Maupassant’s own statement: “Quel enfantillage, d’ailleurs, de croire à la réalité puisque nous portons chacun la nôtre dans notre pensée et dans

nos organes" ("Le Roman," p. xv). Yet, Maupassant believes that a realist can and should give an *illusion of reality*. It is about his illusion of the whole reality, and not only of himself, that Pierre makes new discoveries. He starts out with a small seed of dissatisfaction ("quelque chose comme une graine de chagrin," p. 39) and lets it grow to an all-embracing disillusionment and pessimism. At first, it is but a vaguely felt notion of uselessness, of which he becomes aware while looking at some children in the public garden making sand hills and destroying them with kicks of their feet: "Nos besognes ressemblent aux travaux de ces mioches, pensait-il" (p. 62). Later on, tormented by the increasing certainty about his mother's guilt and annoyed by the frivolous people on the beach, he "songea que sur la terre entière c'était toujours la même chose" (p. 125). Eventually, his pain exceeds the aversion caused by either his own faults or those of his mother; when his father asks him about his conspicuous and constant sadness, he answers: "C'est que je sens terriblement le poids de la vie" (p. 138).

To suggest the depth of Pierre's sorrow while he is preparing to leave his family, Maupassant returns again to the fog symbol: ". . . une tristesse nouvelle s'abattit sur lui, et l'enveloppa comme ces brumes qui courent sur la mer, venues du bout du monde et qui portent dans leur épaisseur insaisissable quelque chose de mystérieux et d'impur comme le souffle pestilentiel de terres malfaisantes et lointaines" (p. 221).

It should be noted that, instead of speaking about the fog directly, Maupassant uses it this time as a term of comparison. Pierre's sadness alone is present, and no longer the fog; but we are told that his state of mind possesses all the attributes of the latter. The notions of evil and impurity, now explicitly mentioned, were, on many a former occasion, implied by the unpleasantness of the fog. Gradually, the reader has been prepared for Pierre's final awareness of a hostile and impure world. The "sens profond" of the novel may well be a growing cognition of the disillusioning and repugnant aspects of human existence. If this interpretation were accepted, then Pierre's resignation to the lonely, unpromising position of a ship's doctor would become a symbol of man's utter isolation and despair when confronted with the brutality of life. The following passage epitomizes Pierre's final attitude: "Ce n'était plus une douleur morale et torturante, mais l'affolement d'une bête sans abri, une angoisse matérielle d'être errant qui n'a plus de toit et que la pluie, le vent, l'orage, toutes les forces brutales du monde vont assaillir" (pp. 221-22).

Here, Maupassant exceeds the psychological consequences of Pierre's isolation from his family. Moreover, he exaggerates the dangers of a man's life at sea. The reason for a point of view as extreme as this must be his

wish to show the “graine de chagrin” grown to its widest proportions. Accordingly, I would like to broaden Professor Grant’s interpretation that Pierre is a representative of human complexity: he represents man facing his destiny. Maupassant invites this reading of the novel by placing Pierre face to face not only with his own demons of jealousy, not only with his mother’s moral weakness, not only with his own doubts and uncertainties, not only with the complexity of human nature, but with “toutes les forces brutales du monde.” Pierre now knows that the world—Maupassant’s world, of course—is a brutal enemy. He, and with him the reader, has discovered the author’s hostile universe.

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE