

## The Price of Appearances: Materialism in Maupassant's *The Necklace* and Modern Consumer Culture

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DOI: <https://10.33096/tamaddun.v24i1.933>

Received: 11 May 2025

Accepted: 20 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the readers' reception on The Necklace short story based on Hall's reception theory. Employing descriptive-qualitative research design, the study focuses on Hall's three main reading positions: the dominant-hegemonic, in which the reader decodes the message as intended by the author; the negotiated, where the reader partly accepts and partly resists the message; and the oppositional, where the reader rejects the encoded message entirely. Data were collected through two main instruments: students' intellectual diaries (reflective journals) and classroom discussions. Data analysis follows Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how university students interpret Maupassant's The Necklace in relation to materialism and contemporary consumer culture, viewed through the lens of Hall's reception theory. The students' responses, categorized into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings, reveal the multiplicity of interpretive positions shaped by ideological alignment, personal experience, and sociocultural context. This study shows that The Necklace story remains a powerful and relevant story, offering rich opportunities for critical engagement and reflection in the classroom. It becomes evident that literary texts are not static but dynamic sites where meaning is contested and reinterpreted across time and space. This study has shown that literature remains an essential tool for fostering critical thinking and for engaging students with the social, cultural, and ideological issues of their time.*

**Keywords:** Reception Theory, Dominant-Hegemonic, Negotiated, Oppositional Position, The Necklace

### INTRODUCTION

Literary texts often serve as mirrors reflecting the cultural, social, and ideological climates of both the time in which they were written and the time in which they are read. Literature investigates the complexities and depths of human behaviour and emotions through the imaginative constructs of fictional realms (Sulistiawati, Hikmah, & Hasbi, 2024). Among such texts, Guy de Maupassant's short story *The Necklace* (originally *La Parure*, published in 1884) continues to engage modern readers with its compelling exploration of materialism, vanity, and social aspiration. In a society increasingly defined by consumerism, social media performance, and economic precarity, the themes embedded in *The Necklace* remain profoundly resonant. As the story centres on Mathilde Loisel, a woman who sacrifices a decade of her life to replace a necklace that ultimately proves to be fake, readers are prompted to question the cost of appearances and the values that underpin both personal and societal

choices. This study revisits Maupassant's work through the lens of modern student readers, applying Stuart Hall's Reception Theory to investigate the multiple ways in which meaning is decoded in a contemporary classroom.

While *The Necklace* belongs to a 19th-century French realist tradition that often critiques bourgeois values and social pretensions, its narrative still provokes reflection on today's culture of consumption and image management. The tale presents an important lesson about the dangers of valuing surface over substance, a lesson that arguably gains more relevance in an era marked by curated digital identities and consumer debt (Peterson, 2023). In Mathilde's tragedy, the loss of youth and beauty over a counterfeit jewel. Readers are left with questions not only about character flaws but also about the socio-cultural forces that drive individuals to pursue unsustainable ideals of success and status (Beaumont, 2022).

To explore how these themes are received by young readers today, this research draws upon the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's Reception Theory (1980). Hall's model emphasizes the active role of the audience in interpreting media texts and argues that meaning is not passively absorbed but negotiated based on the reader's own cultural background, ideology, and lived experience. Hall distinguishes between three main reading positions: the *dominant-hegemonic*, in which the reader decodes the message as intended by the author; the *negotiated*, where the reader partly accepts and partly resists the message; and the *oppositional*, where the reader rejects the encoded message entirely (Hall, 1980). Applying this model to a literature classroom enables researchers to explore not just what students think of a text, but how they position themselves ideologically in relation to its themes.

This study aims to explore the readers' reception on *The Necklace* short story based on Hall's reception theory. The study presented in this article was conducted in a university-level English prose course involving 28 students. As part of the course, students read and analysed *The Necklace* and were subsequently asked to reflect on the story's themes, characters, and relevance to their own lives. Their written responses in the form of intellectual diaries (reflective journal) and group discussions were then analysed according to Hall's reception model. This approach serves two purposes: first, it sheds light on the variety of student interpretations in response to a classic text; second, it offers insight into how themes such as materialism and social aspiration are understood within the context of modern consumer culture.

The use of *The Necklace* as a focal point for exploring materialism is particularly appropriate given current global concerns about consumer behaviour and identity construction. Scholars such as Baudrillard (1998) and Featherstone (1991) have long argued that consumer society is not merely about economic transactions but about the symbolic meanings attached to goods and appearances. In this context, the necklace in Maupassant's story becomes more than just a piece of jewellery, it represents desire, identity, and the social performance of value. Students, many of whom are digital natives and active participants in image-centric platforms like Instagram or TikTok, are not unfamiliar with the pressures of maintaining certain appearances. The students' active learning strategies and approaches emphasize immersion in experience including students' life experiences (Hasbi, Bakri, & Halim, 2025) Thus, their interpretations of Mathilde's choices are necessarily filtered through a lens shaped by their own realities.

Moreover, the classroom as a site of reception offers a rich context for studying how literature is decoded. Unlike traditional literary criticism, which seeks to interpret texts according to formalist or historical frameworks, reader-response and reception theory focus on the interaction between text and reader. This approach has been widely supported in

educational research as a means of fostering critical thinking and student engagement (Rosenblatt, 1995; Beach, 1993). By recognizing students as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of literary knowledge, educators can cultivate deeper awareness of how literature reflects and shapes cultural values. Cultivating intercultural awareness and comprehension constitutes a fundamental element of contemporary higher education within an increasingly globalized context (Hasbi & Bakri, 2024).

### **Theoretical Framework: Stuart Hall's Reception Theory in Literary Interpretation**

Understanding how readers interpret literature requires more than simply identifying the intended message of the author. As Rosenblatt (2021) argues, "Understanding how readers interpret literature requires more than simply identifying the intended message of the author. It also involves examining how the meaning of a text is constructed through interaction with the reader's background, beliefs, and social context" (p. 29). This citation draws on Louise Rosenblatt's influential reader-response theory, which emphasizes the transactional relationship between texts and readers. It also involves examining how the meaning of a text is constructed through interaction with the reader's background, beliefs, and social context.

In this research, Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, particularly his encoding/decoding model of communication (Hall, 1980), provides a critical foundation for analysing students' responses to Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace*. This theory acknowledges that texts are polysemic that is, open to multiple interpretations and that the act of reading involves decoding meaning through one's cultural positioning. This perspective is particularly valuable in educational settings, where diverse student backgrounds often result in a range of interpretations of the same literary work.

Stuart Hall first introduced his encoding/decoding model in 1973, later published in *Culture, Media, Language* (1980), as a challenge to linear communication models that treated audiences as passive recipients of meaning. Hall outlined three primary audience positions: the *dominant-hegemonic*, the *negotiated*, and the *oppositional*. A dominant-hegemonic reading occurs when the audience fully accepts the preferred meaning of the text. In the case of *The Necklace*, this would mean accepting Maupassant's implied criticism of materialism, pride, and vanity as the causes of Mathilde's downfall. A negotiated reading involves partial agreement with the preferred meaning, but with modifications based on personal or cultural experience. A student might, for instance, agree that materialism is problematic, yet also sympathize with Mathilde's desire to escape her lower-middle-class life. An oppositional reading is one in which the audience rejects the intended meaning, possibly critiquing the story for reinforcing oppressive social norms or portraying Mathilde too harshly. These interpretive positions are not fixed but are fluid and shaped by factors such as class, gender, education, and media exposure.

Applying Hall's model to literary reading provides a dynamic lens for analysing how students interact with certain texts. As Fiske (1987) notes, audiences are not merely passive readers but active producers of meaning; they bring their own interpretive frameworks to the texts they read. In literature classrooms, students may decode characters and themes in ways that align with or challenge dominant ideological values, depending on their lived realities. Students today are immersed in digital environments where the performance of identity through consumption is both encouraged and normalized. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok promote aspirational lifestyles, often divorced from economic reality. This context inevitably shapes how students interpret a story like *The Necklace*, which critiques similar behaviours in a different historical and cultural setting.

Moreover, Hall's theory allows educators to recognize and validate multiple student responses without positioning any one interpretation as definitive. This is especially important in literature classrooms, where rigidly prescriptive interpretations can discourage critical thinking and personal engagement. According to Morrell (2008), empowering students to connect literary texts to their own lives fosters deeper understanding and promotes cultural relevance. By encouraging students to take interpretive ownership of *The Necklace*, educators can help them develop critical literacy skills, an awareness not only of what a text means but of how and why it means different things to different people.

In this research, the application of Reception Theory provides a systematic framework for categorizing student interpretations of *The Necklace* according to Hall's tripartite model. Students' intellectual diaries and class discussions were analysed to determine how closely their readings aligned with the story's encoded message. These interpretations were then grouped into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions, allowing for a nuanced analysis of how literary meaning is received in a contemporary classroom. While the story itself offers a singular narrative, the students' varied responses demonstrate the ideological multiplicity of reception.

In summary, Stuart Hall's Reception Theory offers a powerful framework for analysing literary interpretation in educational contexts. By recognizing that meaning is constructed at the point of reception and shaped by cultural positioning, the theory enables researchers and educators to better understand how students engage with literature. In the case of *The Necklace*, Holub (2023) emphasizes that reception theory illuminates the diverse ways in which themes of materialism, social aspiration, and identity are decoded by student readers living in a vastly different world from that of Maupassant's characters. Through this framework, literature becomes not just a window into the past, but a mirror of the present and a dialogue with the future.

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative approach grounded in Reception Theory to explore how university students interpreted Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* in the context of contemporary consumer culture. Specifically, it tries to classify student readings into Stuart Hall's (1980) three audience positions dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional based on their intellectual diaries and discussions. The aim was not only to analyse the variety of responses but also to understand the ideological frameworks students bring to literary texts in an academic setting.

The study was conducted in an undergraduate English prose class at a state university in Indonesia during the 2024–2025 academic year. The course focused on introducing students to literary analysis through short fiction, including realist texts from the 19th and 20th centuries. A total of 28 students (aged 19–22) participated in this study. All students were majoring in English literature study program and had intermediate to advanced proficiency in English. The class was composed of a diverse group of learners, many of whom were first-generation university students and had varied socio-economic backgrounds.

*The Necklace* short story was selected for its thematic relevance and interpretive potential. Its portrayal of material aspiration, social mobility, and personal sacrifice provides fertile ground for reader engagement, particularly within a cultural climate that continues to grapple with issues of class and consumption. The story was presented in English using a widely available public domain translation. Prior to reading, students were given a brief contextual overview of late 19th-century France and the literary conventions of realism.



Data were collected through two main instruments: students' intellectual diaries (reflective journals) and classroom discussions. After reading and analysing *The Necklace*, students were asked to write a 500–700-word diary/reflection addressing the following prompts:

- What is your interpretation of Mathilde's character and her choices?
- What themes in the story do you find most relevant to today's society?
- Do you agree with the message or lesson of the story? Why or why not?

These written reflections were submitted electronically and coded for thematic analysis.

Additionally, classroom discussions were held in small groups (4–5 students per group) followed by a full-class plenary discussion. These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed with students' permission. The use of both written and oral data aimed to capture both individual and collaborative meaning-making processes, a practice supported in reader-response research for triangulation (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995).

The data analysis was guided by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which identifies three potential audience positions:

- Dominant-hegemonic reading: where the reader accepts the text's preferred message without significant resistance;
- Negotiated reading: where the reader accepts parts of the message but adapts it to their own perspective or context;
- Oppositional reading: where the reader rejects the preferred meaning and interprets the text through an alternative or resistant framework.

Student responses were categorized into one of these three positions. For example, a student who viewed Mathilde as a cautionary example of vanity and fully agreed with the story's moral was categorized under the dominant position. In contrast, a student who sympathized with Mathilde's dissatisfaction yet believed her punishment was too harsh represented a negotiated reading. Finally, students who critiqued the story as patriarchal or classist fell into the oppositional category.

After classifying the data into three categories, the data was analysed by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was performed with six-steps procedure: familiarizing with the data, getting initial codes, theme development, theme refinement, theme naming, and report writing. The thematic analysis is an appropriate method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes in qualitative data analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of student responses to *The Necklace* using Stuart Hall's (1980) Reception Theory. Through students' intellectual diaries and classroom discussions, students' interpretations were categorized into three positions: *dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional*. The analysis also revealed recurring themes related to materialism, social pressure, gender roles, and identity formation in contemporary consumer culture. Of the 28 students, 9 were identified as adopting dominant-hegemonic readings, 13 exhibited negotiated readings, and 6 took oppositional positions.

### 1. Dominant-Hegemonic Readings: Accepting the Moral of the Story

Students in this group generally aligned with Maupassant's intended critique of materialism and social pretension. They viewed Mathilde as responsible for her own downfall

due to vanity and pride, and they read the story as a cautionary tale about the dangers of valuing appearance over substance.

For instance, one student, AR (initial code), wrote:

*“Mathilde actually could have lived happily with what she already had, but she chose to lie just to look rich for one night. She wasted ten years of her life for something fake. This shows how dangerous it is to care too much about appearances.”*

Another student, MS, wrote:

*“Mathilde’s ambition to appear luxurious in front of many people resulted in suffering that she and her husband had to endure for 10 years.”*

Such readings reflect the preferred meaning encoded by the author that Mathilde’s fate is a direct consequence of her inability to accept her social position and her obsession with image. These students often referred to moral lessons such as humility, contentment, and honesty, themes that Maupassant subtly weaves into the narrative. As one participant put it, *“If only she had told the truth about the necklace, none of this would have happened.”*

Interestingly, these students also linked Mathilde’s experience to contemporary issues of debt and overspending, particularly in relation to social media. One student compared Mathilde’s desire to impress others to influencers who “borrow luxury items to post online, even if they can’t afford them.” This parallel demonstrates how dominant readings can still be applied meaningfully to the students’ world, reinforcing Hall’s assertion that even preferred readings are interpreted through lived experience (Hall, 1980).

## 2. Negotiated Readings: Empathy and Critical Reflection

The largest group of students produced negotiated readings. These students acknowledged the dangers of materialism but also expressed empathy for Mathilde’s dissatisfaction and contextualized her behaviour as a product of social inequality.

For example, one student, RG, wrote:

*“I understand that Mathilde should not have lied. But at the same time, I feel bad for her because she never had the chance to be what she dreamed of. Maybe her mistake was not being born into a richer family.”*

Another student, NH, wrote:

*“What they had to endure as a result of losing the necklace had a huge impact on their future lives. Fortunately, her husband remained loyal to Mathilde.”*

Students in this group questioned the harshness of Mathilde’s punishment and suggested that the story lacked compassion for individuals trying to break out of poverty or class limitations. Some students also related Mathilde’s experience to their own struggles with self-image and societal pressure. For instance, a student reflected, *“Sometimes I feel like Mathilde too. People expect you to look a certain way, act a certain way, even if it’s not who you are.”*

These responses support Hall’s (1980) notion of the negotiated position, where the audience accepts part of the message but rearticulates it based on individual or cultural context. Moreover, this group’s interpretations reflect the “double consciousness” of many young readers navigating between traditional moral values and modern pressures (Storey, 2018). These students were not rejecting the story’s critique entirely, but they re-framed Mathilde’s decisions as understandable if flawed reactions to systemic pressures.

This interpretive stance also aligns with reader-response theory, which emphasizes the reader's role in constructing meaning based on personal experience (Rosenblatt, 1995). The negotiated readers in this study did not see *The Necklace* simply as a moral tale but as a complex narrative that invites reflection on class struggle, gender roles, and social expectation.

### 3. Oppositional Readings: Critique of Ideology and Gender Roles

Six students provided readings that resisted the text's preferred meaning altogether. These students interpreted the story through critical or oppositional lenses, often focusing on structural inequalities, gender norms, and patriarchal expectations.

One student, FD, wrote:

*"Why is Mathilde blamed for everything? She wanted a better life, but it's not like her husband helped her grow. He just accepted his fate and made her do the same. This story punishes women for dreaming."*

Another student, JL, wrote:

*"Mathilde's decision to borrow her friend's diamond necklace is understandable in that situation. Her desire to look perfect at a party is a natural thing for women. The lost necklace that ruins her life."*

Such interpretations challenge the story's underlying assumptions, aligning with Hall's (1980) oppositional reading position. Students in this group questioned not just the character's actions but the societal structures that defined her options. They viewed Maupassant's narrative not as a critique of Mathilde, but of a society that offers women few paths to upward mobility aside from appearance and marriage.

Other students critiqued the notion of personal responsibility as overly simplistic, instead emphasizing the systemic nature of social stratification. One participant reflected, *"The story teaches people to accept their class, but maybe the real problem is the class system itself."*

These readings were often influenced by contemporary feminist and anti-capitalist discourses, reflecting what hooks (1994) describes as "critical consciousness" the ability to read texts against the grain and challenge dominant ideologies. While this group represented a minority, their responses were articulate and ideologically engaged, revealing the potential of literature to serve as a site of political and social critique.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how university students interpret Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* in relation to materialism and contemporary consumer culture, viewed through the lens of Stuart Hall's (1980) reception theory. The students' responses, categorized into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings, reveal the multiplicity of interpretive positions shaped by ideological alignment, personal experience, and sociocultural context. This discussion elaborates on the implications of those readings in light of literary pedagogy, critical literacy, and the enduring relevance of literary realism.

### 1. The Role of Ideology in Literary Interpretation

Stuart Hall's (1980) model posits that media messages literary texts included are encoded with preferred meanings by their producers but are decoded differently by audiences depending on their ideological positions. In the case of *The Necklace*, the dominant-hegemonic readings accepted the story's intended moral: that vanity and social pretense lead to downfall.

These students internalized Mathilde's fate as a lesson in humility and the perils of aspiring beyond one's class.

This dominant reading reflects the ideological operation of realism as a literary mode. As Beaumont (2022) argues, realism often presents a "structure of feeling" that naturalizes social relations, making them appear inevitable and morally just. Students who accepted Maupassant's critique without question demonstrated how literature can reinforce hegemonic cultural norms, especially those surrounding class and gender.

However, Hall's model allows us to see that such readings are not universal. Students in the negotiated and oppositional categories illustrate how ideology is mediated by experience. The negotiated readers accepted aspects of the dominant message such as the critique of dishonesty—but reinterpreted Mathilde's dissatisfaction as socially conditioned and morally complex. These readers navigated between personal empathy and moral judgment, reflecting what Hall describes as "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (Hall, 1980, p. 137).

Oppositional readings, meanwhile, rejected the encoded message altogether, interpreting the story through critical feminist and anti-capitalist lenses. These students viewed Mathilde's punishment not as a deserved consequence but as symptomatic of a patriarchal and classist society. Such readings affirm Fish's (1980) theory of ideology as a system that both shapes and is challenged by individuals' lived realities.

## **2. Materialism, Class, and Consumer Culture**

One of the central aims of this study was to explore how Maupassant's critique of materialism resonates with students living in a consumer-driven society. Across all interpretive positions, students drew connections between Mathilde's desire for status and modern consumer behaviour, particularly the influence of social media. As Bauman (2007) notes, late modernity has transformed individuals into "consuming selves," whose identities are increasingly constructed through appearance and possession.

The parallel between Mathilde's borrowed necklace and contemporary phenomena such as "flex culture," branded content, and performative wealth on platforms like Instagram and TikTok demonstrates the story's continued relevance. Whether accepting or resisting the narrative's message, students recognized the pressures to conform to visual markers of success—a concern that is not only literary but sociological.

What distinguishes the student responses, however, is the level of critical reflection. Dominant readers viewed materialism as a moral failure, consistent with neoliberal values that emphasize personal responsibility. Negotiated readers, while not excusing Mathilde's behaviour, saw it as a response to limited social mobility and entrenched inequality echoing Bourdieu's (1984) insights into taste, habitus, and cultural capital. Oppositional readers, meanwhile, emphasized the systemic constraints on women and the poor, aligning with critical discourses on intersectionality.

## **3. Gender and the Politics of Aspiration**

An especially notable finding was the attention students paid to the gendered dynamics of the story. Several female students, including those with dominant readings, expressed frustration with the story's treatment of Mathilde, questioning why she alone bore the burden of punishment. This feminist consciousness indicates a shift in how literary texts are received by contemporary readers particularly those aware of the politics of representation.

Hooks (1994) argues that the classroom can be a site of both domination and liberation, where students negotiate meanings in ways that affirm or challenge dominant ideologies. In



this study, the classroom became a space where students articulated concerns about gender expectations, social norms, and moral judgment. Those with oppositional readings critiqued the story's implicit message that women should accept their societal position and remain humble, interpreting this as a reinforcement of patriarchal ideology.

This aspect of the findings also resonates with Morrel's (2008) argument about the silencing of subaltern voices. Mathilde's desire for beauty and luxury, when read uncritically, appears shallow. Yet when considered in terms of systemic marginalization, her aspirations reflect a deeper critique of a society that equates a woman's worth with her appearance and social capital.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the materialism and consumer culture represented in Guy de Maupassant's *The Necklace* through the lens of Stuart Hall's (1980) reception theory, focusing on how 28 university students in an English prose class interpret the story. By categorizing their responses into three positions dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional—the study highlights the ongoing relevance of *The Necklace* in contemporary discourse about appearance, materialism, and social expectations. The students' interpretations reflect the complex ways in which literature continues to serve as a vehicle for social critique, offering a rich space for examining the intersections of class, gender, and identity in both historical and modern contexts.

The findings indicate that students' readings of *The Necklace* are shaped by their sociocultural experiences and ideological positions. Dominant-hegemonic readers aligned with Maupassant's critique of materialism, emphasizing the moral lesson that vanity and social pretension lead to inevitable downfall. These students viewed Mathilde's fate as a cautionary tale, reinforcing values of humility and contentment. On the other hand, negotiated readers acknowledged the story's critique while emphasizing the societal pressures that shape Mathilde's desires, reflecting an understanding of the complex relationship between individual agency and social constraints. Lastly, oppositional readers resisted the story's moral framework, using it as a platform to critique broader issues of gender inequality and class oppression, highlighting how literature can serve as a site for critical reflection and social activism.

The connection between the themes in *The Necklace* and contemporary consumer culture was particularly striking. Many students drew parallels between Mathilde's desire to appear wealthy and the performative consumerism seen in social media today. This parallel underscore the continuing relevance of Maupassant's exploration of materialism, as both his characters and modern individuals grapple with the tension between appearance and authenticity in a consumer-driven society. The students' responses reflect not only their awareness of the text's historical context but also their ability to apply its themes to their own lives, particularly in relation to debt, status, and self-image.

In conclusion, *The Necklace* remains a powerful and relevant story, offering rich opportunities for critical engagement and reflection in the classroom. Through the lens of reception theory, it becomes evident that literary texts are not static but dynamic sites where meaning is contested and reinterpreted across time and space. This study has shown that literature remains an essential tool for fostering critical thinking and for engaging students with the social, cultural, and ideological issues of their time. Moving forward, educators can use such texts to encourage deeper discussions about materialism, identity, and power, helping students develop a more nuanced understanding of both literature and the world around them.

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