19th century Paris: Shifting Norms and Ironic Storytelling in Maupassant’s “Bel-ami”

Abstract

Published in 1885, Maupassant’s “Bel-ami” is a novel in which the reader is drawn by the visual appeal of the colourful descriptions. Although the novel can be read as the story about the advance of a mediocre man to social and political prominence, this article will show that Maupassant uses a dual-voiced discourse and juxtaposes a recognizable 19th century Paris and his protagonist’s sexual exploits in order to call our attention to the duplicity of the Parisian society during Belle-époque. In spite of his carefully assumed impartiality, we shall see that Maupassant’s style is marked by ironical comments where apparently insignificant remarks reveal their implications as the narrative unfolds.

Copyright © Marie-Anne Visoi
In “Bel-ami”, Maupassant challenges the modern reader to reconstruct various aspects of 19th century Paris as they are revealed through descriptive scenes. As I propose to show, the consistent shift between an ironic narrator and the represented speech of the main character in this novel creates a dual-voiced discourse that enables us to have a clear view of the Parisian society of Maupassant’s time. The uniform simplicity and clarity of Maupassant’s style succeed in conveying his protagonist’s thoughts and feelings without breaking the illusion of fiction. As the reader gradually finds out through carefully sequenced descriptive detail, Duroy’s seductive power and provocative sensuality will enable him to change his destiny from a modest clerk working at Northern Railway to a millionaire who has learnt how to manipulate women in order to climb the social ladder. Throughout the novel, Maupassant grounds his ironic presentation of the private lives of his characters on the discrepancy between appearance and reality that acutely reflects the shifting norms and the double standard of morality of his time.

Drawing from Iser’s theory of reading and Bakthin’s dual-voiced discourse concept, I will argue that our understanding of “Bel-ami” relies on a critical assessment of the narrative devices employed by Maupassant. My analysis of “Bel-ami” will start with a discussion of the important role of description in the novel. The sensorial quality of Maupassant’s prose leads us to visualize each scene and to observe the characters’ manners and behavior as the narrative moves rapidly along in a series of brief descriptions of scenes punctuated by the protagonist’s internal speech. Short paragraphs, lively and picturesque sentences and a realistic character portrayal exert an unmistakable influence on our reading as they set up our expectations and arouse our interest in the story. The observations on the role of description will lead to my focus on the “interplay” between the constructed world of the text and our reading activity. Although the novel can be read as the story about the advance of a mediocre man to social and political prominence, this paper will show that Maupassant uses a dual-voiced discourse
and juxtaposes a recognizable 19th century Paris and the sexual exploits of his protagonist in order to call our attention to the duplicity of the Parisian society during Belle époque. As we will see from the examples provided, our ability to understand the effect produced by descriptive scenes and narrative devices will provide us with new critical values in terms of our reading experience and will determine our interpretation of Maupassant’s novel.

Having chosen a reader-response approach for my analysis of “Bel-ami”, Wolfgang Iser’s contributions to our understanding of a complex literary text such as Maupassant’s novel seem quite pertinent. According to Iser, the relationship between text and reader is a process of communication where there is a constant feedback of information, from text to reader, from reader to text. In “Bel-ami”, the method of describing and the type of narration will lead us to a process of “self-correction” since we are constantly making adjustments to modify our ideas. In Iser’s terms, as readers, we “realize” the situation of the text in a sequence of imagined objects taking different shapes as our reading progresses. Furthermore, our expectations will change according to the different viewpoints presented by the narrative voice. In this way, we become able to build new connections with the world of the text and understand characters and events in a new light. For instance, the frequent references to social norms and values of 19th century Paris will force us to reconsider our own viewpoints and alter our opinions when reading Maupassant’s novel. When we come across cultural influences, social norms and literary allusions, a particular situation is created. According to Iser, the “repertoire” and the “strategies” guide us in the process of constituting the meaning of the text. He defines “repertoire” as references to earlier works and cultural influences which appear modified in the text and considers social norms and literary allusions two basic elements of the “repertoire”. In his opinion, when the “repertoire” is made up of different systems, the reader becomes disoriented because it is difficult to connect its diverse elements. Iser argues that the “strategies” have the task of structuring the communication between
reader and text through a background-foreground relation in which the cultural norms and literary allusions constitute the background whereas the new meanings created form the foreground. The relationship between reader and text, as Iser sees it, is based on a “process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event, and the resultant impression of life-likeness” (Iser, 1978, 68).

As far as our present discussion is concerned, we will start by taking into consideration Maupassant’s use of narrative techniques for creating a realistic mode of representation. As the boundaries between the life-like fictional scenes and 19th century Paris evoked in “Bel-ami” are effaced, the reader becomes gradually involved in the world of the text. Indeed, images of Paris with its norms and values are presented by double focalization, through the narrator’s eyes and through the main character’s perspective. A journalist himself, Maupassant offers his readers a critical view of contemporary French political affairs, journalism and financial manipulations. In a world where social standing and identity define financial and political power, Duroy’s story is intricately tied up with the socio-historical context of 19th century Paris where the shifts in social systems had already begun. A surprising view of Paris during Belle-époque is initially evoked through metaphorical language that enables the reader to see the unpleasant aspects of city life: “It was one of those summer evenings when Paris is completely airless. The city, hot as an oven, seemed to swelter in the stifling night atmosphere. The stench of sewage rose up from the granite mouths of the drains, and through the low windows of basement kitchens the foul vapours of dishwater and stale sauces belched into the street.” (Bel-ami, 4)

Maupassant’s indebtedness to naturalism is clearly reflected in his description of Duroy’s poverty at the beginning of the novel and his emphasis on specific aspects of his character’s existence. In the introductory lines of “Bel-ami”, the image of Paris becomes a mode of highlighting not only the revolting aspects of city life but also, the social distinctions of the
time. The notion of setting as the background against which the brutal aspects of his protagonist’s poverty are “documented” by Maupassant is useful for understanding Duroy as a character. Truth-claims such as temporal and geographical indications, as well as other plausible details invoke the world-view of the text (Valdes 1992, 22). As the narrative unfolds, we follow Duroy’s walk through identifiable streets towards the church of the Madeleine on a certain day, the 28th of June, and we start building a perception of Paris closely correlated with the one he experiences. When emphasis shifts from setting to character, Duroy’s preoccupation with everyday costs for his meals brings to mind the previous image of an “airless Paris”. What initially seemed a sensorial description of an urban scene has now, quite clearly, a narrative function: it brings into focus the social reality of a 19th century Paris as seen through the eyes of the main character. As Gerard Delaisement points out, Duroy’s obsession with money enables readers to grasp the world of 19th century Paris with its contrasts (Delaissement 1995, 29).

Outside on the pavement, he stood still for a moment, wondering what to do. It was the 28th of June, and he had left in his pocket exactly three francs forty to last the rest of the month. That meant two dinners but no lunches, or two lunches but no dinners, whichever he preferred. Since a midday meal cost twenty-two sous, rather than the thirty which was the price for dinner, he would, by making do with just lunch, have one franc twenty centimes left over, sufficient to buy him two loafs of bread and sausage and two beers, on the boulevard. (*Bel-ami*, 3)

A realistic mode of representation, where physical details of Duroy’s surroundings are provided, will obviously enhance the reader’s ability to understand 19th century Paris. Furthermore, unexpected events such as the protagonist’s meeting with Forestier, will
familiarize readers with necessary details for understanding Duroy. It is, therefore, through a carefully designed plot structure that we become able to anticipate events and build up expectations early in the novel. Descriptive details and settings of the story are expertly handled: they create suspense and arouse curiosity as the reader has little sense of uncertainty about Duroy’s change of fate. Because the landscape changes as often as the seasons in “Bel-ami”, the story’s mood, created by a constant variety of settings, becomes a way of pointing out Duroy’s transformation. In “Représentations spatiales et narration”, Bernard Demont emphasizes the significance of represented physical space for the understanding of the complex relationship between Maupassant’s character development, setting and his fine irony (Demont 2005, 12-13). A clear illustration of this idea can be found in chapter three, where the descriptive detail of Duroy’s room draws our attention to his “shameful poverty”. Here, by invoking the wallpaper stains, the text is mainly focalized through Duroy and it mirrors his motivation to change his fortune:

His walls, papered in grey with a pattern of blue flowers, displayed quite as many stains as flowers, ancient, unidentifiable stains of dubious origin, which could have been squashed insects or splashes of oil, marks of finger greasy with pomade, or soap scum splashed from the wash-basin. Everything reeked of shameful poverty, the poverty of Parisian furnished rooms. He was filled with rage at the wretchedness of his life. He told himself that he must escape from there without delay, that he must, the very next day, leave this impecunious existence behind him.”(Bel-ami, 30)

It becomes then evident that the use of physical detail sets the main theme of the novel and manages to convey additional information about the main character in such a way that readers are led to follow plot lines and anticipate events in the story.
Concerning the role of description in “Bel-ami”, one should also note the effect of visualization for creating a realistic setting (Hamon 1981, 244). Attention to character portrayal techniques will reveal that characters are often described as they are involved in various activities. For this reason, the reader will have a clear view of what they do rather than perceive them as static fictional beings. Given that many passages are constructed in this manner, the dynamic effect becomes highly noticeable as we read. In chapter two, for example, when Georges Duroy arrives at the Forestiers, he is shown “climbing slowly and nervously up the stairs, his heart pounding, tormented above all by the fear of seeming ridiculous...” (Bel-ami, 17). As Maupassant shifts imperceptibly between the language of the omniscient narrator’s discourse and his main character’s thoughts and feelings, the scene gives the illusion of reality.

As we shall see, it is not surprising that description has a narrative function in “Bel-ami”: it advances the plot and introduces new characters and events through a series of well-sequenced scenes. Iser associates this strategy with the serial story, very popular with 19th century readers. He points out the importance of “cutting techniques” for stimulating the reader’s imagination and creating suspense: “One common means of intensifying the reader’s imaginative activity is suddenly to cut to new characters or even to different plotlines, so that the reader is forced to try to find connections between the hitherto familiar story and the new unforeseeable situations” (Iser 1978, 192). Similarly, in “Bel-ami”, Maupassant brings in new characters, settings and events to hold our interest and create suspense. Seen through Duroy’s point of view as his experience changes, the setting will be an integral part of the effect. By the end of the novel, Paris is no longer the hostile city where Georges Duroy wanders penniless on a hot summer day. Instead, the text provocatively ends with his anticipated wedding that has become a Parisian society event. The mediated access to Duroy’s consciousness in this scene invites us to reflect on the hero’s emotional re-evaluation of his success. Enhanced by
Maupassant’s dramatic irony and a bird’s eye view of the crowd at Duroy’s wedding, the event confirms our expectations as readers:

He walked slowly, his pace steady, his head held high and his eyes fixed on the great sunlit opening of the door. He could feel faint shivers running over his skin, those cold shivers that come with great happiness. He noticed no one. He was thinking only of himself. When he reached the threshold, he saw the crowd that had gathered there for him, for him, Georges Du Roy. The people of Paris were gazing at him and envying him.

Then, raising his eyes, he saw in the distance, behind the Place de la Concorde, the Chamber of Deputies. And it seemed to him that he was about to make one leap from the portico of the madeleine, to the portico of the Palais-Burbon. (Bel-amì, 290)

Having recognized these characteristics of Maupassant’s prose, I will argue that the story of Duroy’s rapid ascension in Parisian society captivates readers not only because of the protagonist’s success in fulfilling his dream, but also, because of the “concealed” ironic stance of the narrator who claims access to Duroy’s mind. An expert observer of the French society of his time, Maupassant exposes critical aspects of the 19th Parisian society and transmits ideas and attitudes through a narrator who is absent from the world portrayed. In « Discourse in the Novel », Bakhtin notes that “a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from different layers and aspects of the work” (Bakhin 1981, 229). As Maupassant allows his readers to witness the shifting norms of 19th century Paris, he distances himself from events and characters by creating a dual-voiced discourse.

As the narrative moves forward, the reader is called upon to re-evaluate temporal and spatial segments. A careful reading that traces Duroy’s transformation in the novel cannot
ignore the importance of foreshadowing for advancing the plot: from the very first scene to the last, Duroy fascinates us with his optimism and his ability to conquer obstacles in 19th century Paris. Maupassant’s manner of presenting Duroy’s initial apprehension at not being able to go to dinner because he does not have evening clothes sets the tone for our own perception of Parisian norms. The emphasis on appearances becomes clear from the following scene:

Flushing, Duroy hesitated, disconcerted. Finally he muttered: ‘The thing is...I haven’t the right clothes.’

Forestier was dumbfounded. ‘You’ve no evening clothes? Goodness! But they’re absolutely essential. In Paris, you know, it would be better not to have a bed than not to have evening clothes.’ *(Bel-ami, 10-11)*

By revealing trivial as well as intimate aspects of his character’s social relationships, Maupassant succeeds in presenting Duroy’s transformation as a fact of life, a necessary adaptation in a changing world. From the readers’ perspective, the protagonist’s transformation becomes of acute interest because it is related to expectations triggered initially by Duroy’s dream of becoming rich. In bringing to the fore the protagonist’s point of view on social norms and cultural values in a represented French world, Maupassant’s observations further our pleasure of reading through ironic observations. As narratorial comments indicate in the following example, Duroy will become familiar with the new setting and people, where unpleasant aspects of city life are discussed “the way doctors talk about diseases or greengrocers about vegetables” *(Bel-ami, 21)*. Here, the narrative voice, superimposed on Duroy’s perspective, registers the minute details at the dinner table and uses negative
connotations to mock the journalist trade - “the vendor of the human comedy by the line”-, as the prelude to a more detailed commentary that will be fully understood in the subsequent chapters.

Duroy found himself seated between Mme de Marelle and her daughter. Once again he was feeling awkward, terrified of using the wrong fork, spoon, or glass. He had four, one with a bluish tinge to it. What could that be for?

Nothing was said during the soup, and then Norbert de Varenne enquired: ‘Have you been reading about the Gauthier case? What an extraordinary business!’

And they discussed this case of adultery complicated by blackmail. They did not talk about it the way you might comment, around a family dinner-table, on events reported in the press, but rather the way doctors talk about diseases, or greengrocers about vegetables. They showed neither indignation nor astonishment over the facts; they searched for their deep-seated, hidden causes, with a professional curiosity and a complete lack of interest in the crime itself. They tried to find clear explanations in terms of underlying motive, trying to identify all the mental phenomena behind the tragedy, seeing it as the scientific consequence of a particular state of mind. The women, too, found this investigation, this task, deeply engrossing. And other recent events were analysed, commented upon, explored from every point of view, weighed upon precisely, with that practised eye and that specialized approach of the dealer in the news, the vendor of the human comedy by the line, just as a tradesman examines, scrutinizes, and weighs up the products he is going to sell to the public.

(Bel-ami, 21)
The shifting in the narration, from the obvious ideological commentary of the omniscient narrator to Duroy’s point of view, allows us to perceive the social and cultural background of the text not only as detached observers, but also, as active participants in the configuration of meaning. Sifting through unfamiliar norms, Maupassant’s readers have to assemble the perspectives in the text in order to arrive at a consistent interpretation.

To further illustrate our activity of reconstruction, let us take a look at other examples in the novel that are designed to show certain particularities of the French society. In a detached manner, the narrator makes us perceive Duroy as an outsider within the society he envies. For instance, the detailed description of Duroy’s humble surroundings examined earlier contrasts sharply with Forestier’s bourgeois home and explains the hero’s desire to become rich. The reader is constantly drawn to Maupassant’s fictional world by the specific truth-claims reflecting culturally imposed French norms. Similarly, the subtle irony that pervades the scenes between Duroy and his mistress, Madame de Marelle, alerts the reader to a surprising view of Parisian society of the time. A clear example of the dual-voiced discourse in “Bel-ami” is the scene where readers come across explicit references to the adulterous relationship between Madame de Marelle and Duroy. In the following passage, the narrative voice points to Duroy’s hesitation at having dinner with his lover’s husband. As Maupassant’s protagonist is “initiated” into unfamiliar social conventions, readers are led to understand norms of the 19th century Parisian society. Here, Maupassant skilfully gives us access to the mediated consciousness of his hero and uses fine irony to depict a society void of moral values.

She offered him her lips on greeting him, as if they had never been estranged, even forgetting, for a few seconds, the sensible caution with which, in her own home, she
avoided his arms. Then she said to him, as she kissed the curly ends of his moustache: ‘you can’t imagine what an annoying thing has happened, my darling. I was looking forward to a real honeymoon, and now here’s my husband turned up, I’m stuck with him for six weeks, and he’s taken some leave. But I don’t want to spend six weeks without seeing you, especially after our little quarrel, so here’s what I’ve fixed up. You must come to dinner on Monday, I’ve already told him about you. I’ll introduce you.’

Duroy hesitated, somewhat at a loss; until then he had never found himself in the presence of a man whose wife was his mistress.” (Bel-amі, 109)

As Hartig points out, Madame de Marelle “becomes the ‘wife’ of two men, Marelle and Georges, in an odd ‘ménage à trois. The child, Laurine, who has given Georges the name “Bel-Ami’ reflects the confusion that occurs in the Marelle household. While Duroy discusses the cultivation of land with Marelle, Laurine falls asleep, sometimes on the lap of her father, sometimes on that of Bel-Ami”(Hartig 1991, 49). The realization that “adultery” is widely accepted will justify Duroy’s future sexual exploits. Even Hartmann’s “faithful” wife will encourage Duroy to visit her at home or suggest clandestine meetings. As previously noted, these examples will allow readers to have a clearer picture of the Parisian family life portrayed in “Bel-amі” and understand Duroy’s contempt for traditional values.

Looking back at how Duroy’s perspective in the novel emerges from the passages discussed here, we can say that our activity of reconstructing the world of the text is closely connected with Maupassant’s character portrayal. For the novelist, it is the reader who needs to interpret the evidence provided in the text in order to make sense of his characters. The sort of image we have of Duroy will be then based on the carefully inserted details such
as: age, social status, moral values and political ideas. As the narrative unfolds, we gather fragments of memories and bits of conversation through the frequent use of flash-back. Narrative interruptions occur when the memory of Duroy’s past life is presented through events such as his visit at his parents’ house with his bride. What follows is an account of their “countrified meal” as the narrator puts it, a pretext for gaining access to Duroy’s childhood memories and familiarizing the reader with the character’s background.

It was a long, countrified meal, consisting of a series of ill-assorted dishes, sausages served after a leg of lamb, an omelette after the sausages. Old Duroy, filled with good cheer by cider and several glasses of wine, let loose a stream of his best jokes, those that he saved for special occasions, coarse, bawdy stories involving, he claimed, friends of his. Georges, who had heard them all, laughed nevertheless, intoxicated by his native air, gripped afresh by his innate love of the area, of the familiar places of his childhood, by all the sensations, returning memories, and rediscovered things of the past, tiny little things, the knife-mark on a door frame, a wobbly chair that recalled a trivial event, earthy smells, the strong scent of resin and trees from the nearby forest, the redolence of the house, of the brook, of the dunghill. (*Bel-ami*, 166)

By drawing our attention to specific events in the story, the narrator not only guides us to an unfamiliar world, but challenges us is to understand the world portrayed in “Bel-ami” through an intimate knowledge of Duroy’s personal details, thoughts and feelings. The information provided by the narrative voice is significant, for it serves a double purpose: to create an intensely real, easily recognizable character and to allow readers to see the fictional space depicted in “Bel-ami” from Duroy’s perspective. There are, of course, a number of
clues in the novel pointing to an authentic Paris: references to contemporary figures, details about financial transactions, political events, newspapers and journalists. To take one example, the explicit comments regarding La vie française are transparent enough to suggest Maupassant’s own familiarity with the world of the press and its newly acquired freedom following the passage of the 1881 French law (Loi sur la liberté de la presse du 29 juillet 1881):

La vie française had acquired considerable importance thanks to its known connections with those in power. It published items of political news ahead of the more serious papers, and revealed, through subtle hints, the plans of the ministers who were its friends, so that all the Parisian and provincial newspapers looked to it for their information. It was quoted, it was feared, and it was beginning to be respected. It was no longer the suspect organ of a group of political speculators, but the acknowledged voice of the cabinet. (Bel-ami, 214)

The incorporation of Duroy’s thoughts in the narration of events allows us to see the represented world of the novel through his perspective. This type of narration that includes historical and ideological commentary creates familiarity with Duroy’s point of view and becomes a forceful way of pointing out the shortcomings of a corrupt society. As Duroy gradually learns to adapt to new values, his point of view changes our mode of perception and forces us to re-evaluate opinions of his actions. Thus as the novel unfolds, Duroy’s modernity is clear. His constant introspection and keen awareness of the duplicity around him, as reported by the omniscient narrator in “Bel-ami”, grant him unquestionable “realism” and credibility. As Bakhtin notes, “a gradual formation” in the characters of the European modern novel and “a certain duality, a lack of wholeness characteristic of living
human beings, a mixture within the man of good and evil, strength and weakness” Bakhtin 1981, 392). In this sense, Maupassant’s realistic presentation of Duroy has a major influence on our reading. His privileged views come in sharp contrast with those around him. Also, his critical assessment of other characters’ ideas and opinions will become apparent in the narrator’s discourse that will gradually force readers to alter impressions already formed in order to reconstruct the meaning of the text. From this perspective, Duroy’s progress is closely linked to his ability to understand the hypocrisy and snobbery of the society he lives in. What sets him apart from the other characters in the novel is his cynical view of the people he once envied. Duroy’s exclamation: “What a filthy lot, they’re all scoundrels, all crooks!” (Bel-ami, 109), points up deeper implications for irony’s function in the novel. In this case, the reader can use the information from the previous chapters to reflect on Duroy’s desire to belong to “the filthy lot”. Thus, the dramatic irony of this scene installs Maupassant’s readers in a privileged position as they can have a glimpse of Duroy’s transformation. Given Duroy’s “duality” of character, the story of his social ascension represents a focal point in the text because readers are constantly stimulated to adjust their opinions of this character.

As I have proposed in the beginning, my intention was to focus on the narrative discourse in “Bel-ami” in an attempt to reveal how the readers become able to grasp the world of the text. By paying close attention to Maupassant’s use of descriptive detail and narrative discourse we have seen that realistic character portrayal and skillful use of place and time settings, correlated with the use of a dual-voiced discourse, present us with new perspectives of the fictional world portrayed in “Bel-ami”. The emphasis on appearances is reflected, as I have shown, in the realistic presentation of the shifting norms in a recognizable 19th century Paris, a clear indication of Maupassant’s craftsmanship. As we participate in the pleasure of reading “Bel-ami”, the text of the novel maintains our interest
through a variety of intensely physical descriptions and a clever use of life-like scenes that have an immediate appeal to our senses. Extraordinary as the events may be, they are so rich in detail and so convincingly presented that we are progressively drawn into a closer view of Paris during Belle-époque. In “Bel-ami”, Maupassant uses irony to show that sex, money and power are part of the human condition and, with a modern twist, provides insights into the ways in which the pursuit of self-interest can become an unscrupulous use of power and manipulation.
References


