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Eng: 2850

Assignment: "A Simple Heart"

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### "A Simple Heart"

The whole story "A Simple Heart" is about a simple and broken heart country woman who works for fifty years as maid. She dedicates her life to her mistress, who treats her pretty badly, but she keeps going mostly through dedication to her dead pet parrot. It sounds sad because it is sad.

There are several other faces such as Madame Aubain, Virginie, Paul, Victor, Monsieur Bourais, Theodore, and Townies in the story, but the main character is the Felicite's whose name means happiness, a maid who, despite mistreatment by her mistress, is fiercely loyal to the family she serves "For a hundred francs a year, she did the cooking and the housework, she sewed, washed and ironed, she could bridle a horse, fatten the poultry and churn the butter, and she was unfailingly loyal to her mistress, even though the latter was not a pleasant person" (1.1). She dies alone and impoverished. This stark vision of life is meant to open readers' eyes to the inequalities in society.

Felicite's early life is that she is an orphan reared haphazardly as a barnyard laborer, exposed to want and abuse, is without personal attractions or affections;

Her father, a mason, had died in a fall from some scaffolding. Then her mother died, her sisters scattered, and a farmer took her in and employed her, small as she was, to look after the cows in the fields. She would shiver in her rags, drink pond water lying flat on her stomach, and be beaten for the slightest reason, and was finally thrown out over a theft of thirty *sols* which she had not committed. (2.2)

Her childhood is so tragic that it's hard to even imagine living through it. What's even more amazing is that she doesn't seem to be embittered by the suffering. It's more like she sees it as a normal part of life. She is courted briefly by a brusque young farmer named Theodore who is looking for an establishment and safety from the draft. When he marries a wealthy, older widow, Felicite spends one night in the fields, weeping, then gives notice and leaves her farm for the small town of Pont-l'Eveque. In front of the inn there, she meets the young Mme Aubain, a widow in reduced circumstances, and is engaged as a domestic after a brief conversation, because she is full of such goodwill and makes so few demands, although she is very ignorant. Felicite's early involvement with the Aubain household centers on her affection for the children of her employer. She also orients herself within a weekly round of visits from a set circle of acquaintances of Madame and occasional idyllic visits to the Aubain property in the countryside. On one such visit, Felicite saves the family from a charging bull, bravely holding it at bay until all escape. She ignores her newfound reputation for heroism. A more far-reaching concern is Virginie Aubain's resulting nervous invalidism, treated by ocean baths at Trouville. There Felicite is reunited with a long-lost sister and meets her young nephew Victor, another child for her to love.

Felicite is crazy about Madame Aubain's daughter, Virginie, and about her own nephew, Victor. Virginie dies at boarding school of pneumonia, which breaks both Felicite's and Madame Aubain's hearts. Victor signs on to an ocean voyage and dies of yellow fever in Cuba, to Felicite's utter dismay. She inherits a parrot named Loulou, and after he dies she has him stuffed. Madame Aubain

dies, and Felicite remains in her room, impoverished and deaf. She gets very sick until one day she dies, with a vision of Loulou as the Holy Spirit greeting her in heaven. Felicite really doesn't change much over the course of the story. She's as innocent and loyal as ever even on the day she dies.

The story is an important example of Realism, because it focuses on the little guy (in this case, the little gal, a servant) rather than a grand hero, and looks at the way pesky stuff like illness is the result of socioeconomic factors.

The main themes of the story are Home, suffering, humility, society & Classes, wealth and mortality. Gustave Flaubert uses the story of Felicite to study the transcendence of the qualities of love, courage, and faith in a life firmly anchored in the most tragic, sordid, and limited circumstances.

The story is almost entirely in Madame Aubain's house, where Felicite works as a maid. For Madame Aubain, the house represents a step down; she used to be rich, but lost it all when her husband died and left her tons of debt, so she had to move into this measly little house in town. Felicite, on the other hand, is the maid. The house isn't hers—in fact, when Madame Aubain dies, her son puts it up for sale without even telling Felicite.

Felicite doesn't really have a home, so her workplace becomes her world. The injustice of her position in society is reflected through her lack of home and the way that she relates to Madame Aubain's place.

Things pretty much never go her way. She's orphaned as a young girl, jilted by her first love, treated with indifference by her boss, and lives to see the deaths of her beloved nephew, her boss' daughter, and the boss lady herself. She also hit by a stagecoach and goes deaf and blind by the time she dies.

Felicite is the picture of humility whereas many other characters are proud of their accomplishments, but she is humble. To put it simply, she is content with leftovers. This is her attitude toward life. In many ways Felicite's humility is related to her innocence. Her lack of knowledge and experience leads her to ask silly questions about geography, and to love with abandon. All of this is what gives her "a simple heart," as the title says.

The story is also about social classes. Flaubert mentions the bourgeoisie (the French middle class) in the very first sentence. Felicite is the representative of the lower classes. Her mistreatment is justified by the fact that she was born into a lower social class; it's just the way it is.

The story focuses a lot on dates, spanning the course of about fifty years. It was during this same timeframe that the July Revolution went down. July Revolution happened when one unpopular king was overthrown in favor of another, Louis-Philippe. L.P. was all about the middle classes (the bourgeoisie), and they had lots of power during his reign. Which means that people like Felicite.

"A Simple Heart" is an example of Realism. What aspects make it such a great specimen of the genre?

What keeps people from rising in socioeconomic status?

What keeps them loyal to a system that keeps them down?