

# Twisted Mis-tress: A Stylistic Analysis of Fetishism in Maupassant's *La Chevelure*

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## Introduction

*La Chevelure* is a short story by Maupassant told by a first-person narrator visiting a doctor in an asylum. The characters are unnamed but labelled: doctor, narrator and madman. I will use these labels to refer to them throughout. The doctor introduces a madman fascinated by objects and in love with a tress of hair. The madman's obsession for objects is a consequence of his fascination with 'women of the past' (MacMaster's translation of "femmes de jadis"). After reading the madman's diary, the narrator is amazed and in disbelief towards the madman's obsession for the hair.

Maupassant's short story features on the French National Curriculum for French literature for secondary school and college levels (Eduscol). The story has garnered attention from an educational viewpoint and from the discipline of literary studies, but so far, the language of the text has received little attention. The story's relationship with censorship is noteworthy in the context of its production: it was first published in 1884,

a period in which censorship was common in France before the 1881 Press Law was ratified (Goldstein, 787). Nevertheless, the story was published despite the taboo topics it features, such as fetishism. The aim of this paper is to provide a stylistic analysis of the story by exploring how the madman's growing fetishist tendencies are featured in ways that avoided censorship at the time and in present French Curriculum, but also guides readers' interpretation of the story's potential endings. Therefore, three main research questions emerge:

**Research question 1 (RQ1):** How are taboo topics such as fetishism represented in a story in a way that avoids censorship?

**Research question 2 (RQ2):** How is the madman's evolution of fetishism conveyed linguistically?

**Research question 3 (RQ3):** How are readers guided into interpreting the end of the story?

I first review the key themes emerging from *La Chevelure*. I then conduct a stylistic analysis of the text, looking specifically at the linguistic progression conveying the madman's evolving fetishism and how this guides readers' interpretation of the ending. Finally, I discuss the perceived moral of the story and its interpretations.

### **Literature review**

In this section, I review existing literature on the key themes present in *La Chevelure*. Firstly, I discuss literary approaches to the story, and since the topics in question revolve around fetishism, the second part of this section focuses on a psychological approach to those topics.

### **Overview of *La Chevelure*: literary consensus**

*La Chevelure* has been the subject of varied literary and psychological studies with specific focus on key themes, narrative frames, and plot development. However, there has not been any linguistic studies. *La Chevelure* is considered to exhibit key elements that make Maupassant's

narratives atypical, such as a frame and similar plot points. Maddox explains that a recurrent scheme occurs in Maupassant's stories: "a narrating subject acquires the segment's principal object, these being, respectively, the journal given to the narrator by the physician; the antique wardrobe purchased by the writer, as well as its covert contents; and finally, the tress which the perplexed narrator is contemplating as the story ends" (665). Benhamou adds that Maupassant uses a unique structure in his short stories: a man alone at night in trance, allows for occurrence of the supernatural and inexplicable phenomena.

In this story, the narrative frame supports the building of suspense and the element of surprise of having a character as narrator (Cogman, 37). The frame also shocks readers by "generating thematic echoes, narrative complexity, and verbal play" (Cogman, 46). The theme of madness is predominant in the plotline and is delivered by the character of the madman, making him the focus of the story (Benhamou). Apter views the strangeness and shock element of *La Chevelure* as a result of "Maupassant's staged description, replete with a figure of phallic displacement ("la queue en feu"), a coprophilic attraction to odor, and a brilliant shine (approximating Freud's famous "Glanz auf der Nase"), seems to parody rather than to anticipate Freud" (108). Through this observation, the madman himself is no longer the focus of the narration, as his madness is overridden by his fetishism. Apter defines the madman's practices as "gynotextual fetishism, that is, a female fetishism traversing literary and psychoanalytical boundaries" (100). The boundaries in question are explained by Rifelj as women able to take possession of men (91), and in fact, the madman is controlled by the objects associated with those women (Benhamou, 86).

From this review of the literary analysis, the key themes that emerge from *La Chevelure* through Maupassant's narrative frame clearly relate to fetishism. To have a comprehensive understanding of the story, a psychological review of the madman's fetishist tendencies is needed. First, I define fetishism, and then review the specific fetishes of objectophilia and hair embodiment as they are recurrent in the storyline.

### ***Fetishism in La Chevelure***

Fetishism is a key theme in *La Chevelure* and it is deployed in varied ways relating to lust and emotional affect. A fetish is “a paraphilia characterized by recurrent, intense sexual fantasies, urges, or behaviour involving inanimate objects such as women's undergarments, stockings, or shoes that are treated as fetishes” (Colman, 549). Rolls explains Freud’s theory (of the phallic women) behind the definition of fetish, making it easier to understand a behaviour otherwise stigmatised (15). Freud’s theory is that when young boys see their mother’s genitals and notice that it does not resemble their own, an irrational fear to lose their penis overcomes them (Rolls, 15). To deal with this trauma (known as castration anxiety) the boys look away from their mothers, and stare at the last thing they observed before their discovery. The object in question becomes a screen memory, which can later be elevated to a fetish when considered to replace a woman. In the case of the madman in *La Chevelure*, his fetishes are objects once possessed by women (objectophilia) and women’s hair.

Objectophilia is a form of fetishism involving individuals attracted sexually or emotionally to objects, often setting aside human intimacy (Kabiry, 20; Marsh, 1). According to Kabiry, objectophiles believe in animism, and feel a reciprocation of their attractions for those objects based on their beliefs (20). Some researchers (Kabiry, 23; Sinmer, Hughes and Sagiv; Smilek et al.) argue that objectophilia could stem from object-personification synaesthesia, which allows individuals to detect personalities in objects, as the madman does in the story.

Since *La Chevelure* portrays a man obsessed with a tress of hair, it is essential to review the embodiment of hair. According to Merskin, bodies and body-parts are not only a vehicle of flesh but a witness of social norms identity and class (593). Body-parts can become vehicles of meaning and symbols, and hair displays a person’s identity, personality, social status and cultural belonging as well as having a symbolic and sexual function (Pradère, Serre, and Moro, 151-152; Pomey-Rey). This supports Rifelj’s idea that loose hair can have an erotic charge and be associated with sexuality, particularly when long and abundant, as the tress in *La Chevelure* is described (88).

Apter states that authors of the nineteenth century strategically represented eighteenth-century women as “fiction, fixture, and even fetish of the feminine” (66). To her, this recurring theme of symbolic embodiment is a type of “erotic synecdoche” which is used to “influence the portrayal of femininity” (Apter, 71), which reinforces Maddox’s point that “the eroticized synecdoche is subjectivized” (667). From these analyses, it seems the tress of hair is synecdochical in Maupassant’s story thematically as it tends toward the symbol of a woman. As my analysis in the remainder of this paper shows, the tress is also synecdochical linguistically.

### **Stylistic analysis of *La Chevelure***

As shown in the literature review section of this paper, academics in literary and psychological studies have studied *La Chevelure*, but not through a linguistic lens. The aim of this paper is to build upon the existing analyses and provide a stylistic approach to the text in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the text overall. I argue that the key themes reviewed above of fetish, objectophilia and hair embodiment are stylistically embedded in the text, and I aim to use my analysis of the language to further support the existing analyses of the story and answer the three research questions stated above.

### **Methodology**

To analyse the short story, I apply the theory of foregrounding (Leech, 30-33; 59-61; Leech and Short, 55; Short, 10-15).<sup>1</sup> Foregrounded elements of a text stand out against the norm of the rest of the text, because of deviation or repetitive nature (Simpson, 49). Deviation can occur internally when the linguistic element deviates from the text itself (Short, 36-37). This deviation requires a pattern to be built within the text first, so that linguistic elements can then deviate from it. Deviation can also occur externally when the linguistic element deviates from the general

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<sup>1</sup> The theory of foregrounding is typically attributed to Mukařovský (44-49). This paper is concerned with readers’ experience of *La Chevelure*, and with the text being taught in schools, a lot of contemporary readers are students. I thus use Leech and Short’s work on the theory, as it is most often used in the teaching of the theory.

language norm (here French and English), which means it is not solely occurring in the text in question. Finally, elements of language can be foregrounded by parallelism: they form a pattern or repetition in the text. Foregrounded language can have an aesthetic and a de-automatisation effect<sup>2</sup> by attracting readers' attention to specific textual elements:

the function of poetic language to surprise the reader with a fresh and dynamic awareness of its linguistic medium, to de-automatize what was normally taken for granted, to exploit language aesthetically. Foregrounding is thus the 'throwing into relief' of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language (Wales, 166; see also Leech and Short, 23, 32).

De-automatisation has for principle that not only can certain linguistic features be foregrounded in a (literary) text, but they also alienate readers (Wales, 100), and this de-automizing effect of language is most salient to *La Chevelure* due to the taboo topics discussed.

I use foregrounding theory to analyse the text as it explains effects real readers might perceive (Miall and Don Kuiken, 393-395; "Foregrounding the Sublime," 162; "Foregrounding and feeling," 90-92; Van Peer, 99-101). Since this story is part of the French National Curriculum (Eduscol), I aim to analyse the text in a way that could be tailored for teaching and learning purposes. Giovanelli explains that foregrounding principles can be used for teaching text analysis at school level, thus suggesting that this method of analysis is best fitted for this paper. In my analysis of *La Chevelure*, I choose to focus on foregrounded elements in light of my research questions, as opposed to analysing the entirety of the text. Since the aim is to observe how the language used conveys the madman's deteriorating mental state, the analysis is chronological.

After conducting an analysis of *La Chevelure*, it became clear that key themes of objectophilia and hair fetishism were significant in the story and that the progress in the madman's obsession was indeed linguistically illustrated. Therefore, the findings of my analysis are presented thematically whilst using the chronological order of the story

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<sup>2</sup> "De-automatisation" is also known as "defamiliarisation" (Wales, 99).

to shed further light on this obsessional progression. I refer to the entire text in my analysis, but also provide key extracts and their translations (appendices 1, 2 and 3) that are representative of the madman's increasing obsession for the purpose of comparing and contrasting them. I argue that the progression in the madman's developing fetish practices is not only illustrated through language but is specifically conveyed through three distinct figures of speech: animation, personification and synecdoche.

Animation, personification and synecdoche play an important role in the portrayal of the madman's obsession for furniture and hair. Therefore, it is worth defining these figures of speech, particularly since some academics find the definition of the concept of synecdoche not specific enough (Berg, 176; Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 236-237; Nerlich, 203). Animation attributes inanimate objects with actions (non-human or animal-like) that they do not naturally possess, such as "the candles *grew* pale" (*OED*). Personification is the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects, such as "the wind *cried*" (*OED*). Synecdoche is a figure of speech which uses a more inclusive term to refer to a less inclusive term, either by naming some part or constituent of it, for example hands for manual labourers (Baldick; *OED*). Additionally, Chrzanowska-Kluczevska adds that synecdoche has its own cognitive functionality which brings relevant and salient qualities or parts of entities into focus and contributes to the description by being not only "narration-enhancing" but also "narration constructing" (237, 245). This later point is relevant to the impact of synecdoche in my analysis of the text, since I argue that the madman's obsession is conveyed through a linguistic progression.

The original text is in French, and it is therefore this version of the story I analysed first. However, for the sake of accessibility, the professional translation of the text into English is also included (see Maupassant, "Short Stories"). I analysed the English version of the text also to observe potential discrepancies between the French and English versions, but both shared the same foregrounded features I discuss in this article. The translation lacks precision in portraying the madman's fetishist tendencies, thus in addition to the translation, I also provide my

own more accurate translation when needed. The main reason for this lack of precision could be to avoid censorship by removing graphic details of stigmatised topics such as fetishism and sex.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Objectophilia and hair fetishism in La Chevelure: a linguistic progression***

This section shows that the thematical evolution of the madman's fetishism is linguistically illustrated, and thus answers RQ1 and RQ2. Furthermore, I argue that there is a contrast between each of the madman's interactions with objects. His first interaction is with a watch, and animation is used to convey the madman's attraction to the object. However, in his next encounter with an object, a wardrobe, personification is used to convey the madman's emotions. Finally, the last of the madman's interactions portrayed in the story is with a tress of hair. The madman's feelings for the tress are conveyed through synecdoche. With each interaction, the madman's fetish grows from objectophilia to human hair, which is illustrated by the linguistic progression of figure of speech used, from comparison to embodiment.

To analyse this progression of fetishism, I use extracts from the text that illustrates the madman's interactions with the varied objects. Each of the three extracts showcase the main physical interaction between the madman and the objects. The first extract, from paragraph 5 of the story, recalls the madman's interaction with the watch (Appendix 1). The second extract is from paragraphs 11 and 12 and portrays the madman's interaction with the wardrobe (Appendix 2). Finally, the third extract combines paragraphs 33 to 35 and shows the interaction with the tress of hair (Appendix 3). Each extract features my own sentence numbering for convenience.

Extract 1 (see Appendix 1) is from paragraph 122 of the original French text.<sup>4</sup> It is the first interaction of the madman with the watch. He

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth bearing in mind the cultural differences between the French and British when it comes to sexuality. Budd notes while the British maintain their private life private; the French tend to be more open (55-56).

<sup>4</sup> For the original French version of the text, all references are from paragraphs 119-131 available to be viewed on Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56374/56374-h/56374-h.htm> as the text is Public Domain.



describes its physical appearance, and then moves on to explain the emotional significance of the watch. The watch is animated and given characteristics that only living beings (humans or animals) could possess in a literal setting. For instance, in sentence (3), the verb “palpiter” (“vibrate,” palpitate) refers to an inanimate object which logically does not possess a heart. The action refers to the contraction of a heart, human or animal. However, in this instance, the verb has the subject “elle” in reference to the watch. This is followed by the clause “de vivre sa vie de mécanique”<sup>5</sup> (“to live its mechanical life”) which is also an animation due to only humans or animals having a life represented by a heartbeat. This metaphor animates the watch and provides the illustration of the watch being alive. The phrase “le coeur de la montre battant” (“the heart of the watch beating”) in sentence (4) is another animation of the watch as it gives the mental representation of the watch having a beating heart, which only humans and animals have in a literal setting. Since a watch does not possess a heart, each of these examples of animation are foregrounded semantically by external deviation.

Additionally, the clause in this last example “le coeur de la montre battant contre le coeur de la femme” (4) (“the heart of the watch beating beside the heart of the woman”) is part of it furthermore foregrounded by parallelism due to the repeated structure. The clause repeats the structure “le coeur de la” (“the heart of the”) followed by a noun, first “montre” (“watch”), then “femme” (“woman”). Both nominal groups are separated by the preposition “contre” (“beside”). The fact that the watch is mentioned before the woman it belonged to highlights the madman’s thought process: he first encounters the object, then fantasises about the women of the past who wore it. The description of the watch uses lexical and grammatical tools as well as figurative language to portray the object as animated. Those linguistic features allow readers to experience how

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For the English translation of the text, all references can be viewed on Project Gutenberg [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H\\_4\\_0085](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H_4_0085) as the text is Public Domain.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (see Lakoff and Johnson; Kövecses) the phrase “vivre sa vie mécanique” suggests that the watch’s life is understood in terms of a human life thus generating the conceptual metaphor MACHINES ARE PEOPLE. This further animates the watch, personifying it to an extent.

the madman views the object and where his fascination for it is coming from, all whilst defamiliarizing readers with this unusual behaviour.

This first encounter between the madman and the watch can be contrasted with the second encounter he has with another object – a wardrobe. Indeed, in the first encounter, the watch is only animated in the description. However, there is a clear contrast with the second encounter he has with an object: the wardrobe in question is personified as a lover (see Appendix 2, paragraphs 123-124 of the original French text). Sentence (1) of the second extract is a rhetorical question foregrounded by parallelism in the overall story as it is one of many rhetorical questions. Those questions show the madman does not fully grasp his uncontrollable attraction for objects and uses his diary to make sense of what he is going through. The sentence also contains the phrase “le souvenir de ce meuble me poursuivit-il” (“the remembrance of that wardrobe haunts me”). It includes the reflexive verb (verbe pronominal) “me poursuivit” which has as its subject the memory of the wardrobe with “il” or “le souvenir de ce meuble,” and the object of the reflexive verb is “me,” the madman. In French, reflexive verbs indicate that the action of the sentence is imposed upon the passive subject. The rhetorical question therefore not only highlights the madman’s lack of control of his objectophilia, it also grammatically shows that he is subject to it. The system of transitivity—based on Halliday’s functional grammar—can be applied here to further observe the passivity of the madman (“Notes on Transitivity: Parts 1 and 2;” Halliday & Matthiessen, “An Introduction to Functional Grammar”). Transitivity allows us to “comprehend relations between verbs, noun phrases, and adverbials in the clause” and it “locates stylistic significance in the ideational function of language; that is, in the cognitive meaning or sense which for the dualist is the invariant factor of content rather than the variable factor of style” (Leech and Short, 26-27). The phrase “le souvenir de ce meuble me poursuivit-il” reflects a material process, in which “le souvenir de ce meuble” is the actor, “me” is the goal, and “poursuivit-il” is the material verb (although in a figurative sense it has a mental meaning). In fact, the entirety of the extract features French reflexive verbs (verbes pronominaux) which have for subject the wardrobe whereas the “me” refers to the madman and is the direct object: “tentait” (“tempted”) in sentence (2); “séduit” (“charms”)

and “envahit” (“disturbs” or invades) in sentence (4). These reflexive verbs are foregrounded semantically by external deviation as they personify the wardrobe. Certain actions attributed to the wardrobe suggest forethought and are used figuratively to portray the madman’s emotion towards the wardrobe and showcase its importance for him. These instances of personification accomplish two effects: they bring the wardrobe to life in the narration and portray it as the madman sees it, thus alienating readers. Moreover, the instances of personifications convey that the madman has no control over his objectophilia; he is subject to it.

Furthermore, other types of imagery are used to bring the wardrobe to life in the narration. The last clause of sentence (4) “comme ferait un visage de femme” (“as a woman’s face might do”) is a simile that compares the wardrobe’s charming attributes to a woman’s face. This simile is foregrounded by external deviation as it compares an object to a woman, thus drawing further attention to the madman’s attraction to objects, as he is substituting them for women. The clause “son charme entre en vous” (“the enchantment of it penetrates your being”) in sentence (5) is foregrounded by external deviation as the subject of the verb “penetrate” is the nominal group “son charme,” which is an abstract concept animated by the metaphor. The determiner for the nominal group is the possessive pronoun “son” (“his”) which refers to the wardrobe’s attributes, here, its charming qualities. This metaphor further personifies the wardrobe and illustrates the hold it has on the madman.

Sentence (5) and sentence (6) include more phrases exemplifying the progression of the madman’s obsession. In sentence (5) the phrase “on l’aime déjà, on le l1evian, on le veut” (“one loves it, one desires it, one wishes to have it”) indicates the progression of the madman’s feelings for the wardrobe: he loves it, then desires it and he finally must have it. In sentence (6) the phrase “doux d’abord, comme timide, mais qui s’accroît, l1eviant violent, irresistible” (“gently at first, as though it were timid, but growing, becoming intense, irresistible”) the madman’s need to possess the object is described as an evolution: it is gentle and timid, which is a personification of the madman’s need, thus further foregrounding the phrase by external deviation. Then his need intensifies

and finally becomes irresistible, to the point that he buys the wardrobe. These structures in sentences (5) and (6) are foregrounded by parallelism because they list the madman's feelings and actions with the object, but their syntax mirrors the progression of the madman's objectophilia. The sexual language used to describe the wardrobe can alienate readers by associating two concepts typically contrasting with one another.

The third extract (see Appendix 3, paragraph 129 of the original French text) showcases the madman's interaction with the tress of hair; the climax of his fetish practices. This extract shows the linguistic and conceptual shift of the tress from object to woman in the madman's mind and is consequently pivotal in the plot. Sentence (1) contains the independent clause "les baisers I je la réchauffais me faisaient défaillir de bonheur" ("I almost lost consciousness as I kissed it"), which has for subject "les baisers" and the reflexive verb "me faisaient défaillir" as the main verb. The subject of the reflexive verb is the abstract concept of "les baisers" and the object is "me", the madman. A transitivity analysis of the phrase "les baisers dont je la réchauffais me faisaient défaillir" can reveal the madman's increasing loss of control. It is a material process where "les baisers dont je la réchauffais" is the actor, "me" is the goal and "faisaient défaillir" is the material verb. The structure of the reflexive verb having an inanimate object as main subject and the madman as object is foregrounded by parallelism due to its prevalence in the story: it illustrates the madman's lack of control over his physical attraction for the tress of hair.

The phrase "faisaient défaillir de bonheur" ("I almost lost consciousness") is also foregrounded by external deviation because it is an exaggerated statement. This hyperbole (association of opposite concepts) sheds light on the intensity of the madman's objectophilia and hair fetish. Furthermore, in this first independent clause, the verb "réchauffais" ("warmed") is foregrounded by external deviation due to its metaphorical usage. This metaphor generates a mental representation of heat and passion for readers, thus conveying the madman's feelings for the tress. The second subordinate clause of sentence (1) "comme une maîtresse qu'on va posséder" ("as if it were my sweetheart") is a simile and is thus foregrounded by external deviation. The madman compares

the tress to his mistress or his sweetheart which explicitly illustrates what the tress of hair means to him and the place it holds in his life.

Sentence (3) of this extract “elle est revenue” (“she came back”) is foregrounded by internal deviation as it is crucial in the storyline and shows the conceptual shift of the tress of hair in the madman’s mind. In French, this shift is subtle as there is no neutral pronoun and the noun “chevelure” is feminine. However, in the English translation the shift is rendered obvious by a change in pronoun used to refer to the tress: so far, the tress was referred to with the neutral pronoun “it,” but from sentence (3) of this extract onwards in the diary entry, it is referred to as “she.” One could argue that this shift is not perceptible in French and that it is solely part of the translation. Although this is a valid point, based on the rest of the text and the analysis below, I suggest this linguistic shift of pronouns in this particular sentence embodies the conceptual shift of the tress into a woman in the madman’s mind. This is further shown by the instances of synecdoche present in the rest of the text.

Sentence (4) contains synecdoche with the phrase “qu'elle était vivante autrefois, grande, blonde, grasse, les seins froids, la hanche en forme de lyre” (“she was in life, tall, fair and round”). This phrase is foregrounded by parallelism because the madman lists the physical attributes he imagines the woman with the tress of hair he fetishizes would look like. From the tress of hair, he builds a character with a full body in his mind, thus rendering the tress synecdochical in this sentence: from one element he constructs the concept of a woman. This phrase is foregrounded by external deviation due to its figurative (and unsettling) nature. It is also significant that the physical description he gives of this woman focuses on her sexual attributes such as “les seins froids” (“cold breasts”) and “la hanche en forme de lyre” (“hips shaped like a lyre”).<sup>6</sup> This focus on the woman’s sexual traits evidences the nature of the madman’s obsession for the tress: it is a sexual relation and a distorted fetish tendency. The independent clause in the second part of sentence (4) “et j'ai parcouru de mes caresses cette ligne ondulante et divine qui va de la gorge aux pieds

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<sup>6</sup> This is my translation as these phrases were not included in the original English translation. One can suppose that this omission is due to the explicit nature of the language and the fear of censorship from the translator, thus reinforcing the taboo effect the story can have.

en suivant toutes les courbes de la chair” (“I caressed her divine curves from her throat to her feet, following each curve of flesh”)<sup>7</sup> is also foregrounded by external deviation as it is a euphemism.<sup>8</sup> The madman provides an image of what physical actions he did to the tress which would be graphic and prone to censorship at the time of the original publication. In fact, the translator chose not to translate this part of the sentence, potentially due to its crude innuendo. The adjective “divine” is foregrounded by external deviation since it is metaphorical and conveys the hold the tress has on the madman and the place it occupies in his mind.

Sentence (4) includes the phrase “je l'ai vue, je l'ai tenue, je l'ai eue” (“I saw her, I held her, I got her”) which is a semantic progression of the madman’s feelings for the tress. This triplet is foregrounded by parallelism not only because of the repetition it creates, but also because it is a literal mirror of the madman’s feelings. He first sees the object, then holds or touches it, which leads him to wanting to possess the object. This is the pattern he follows, and this phrase is the linguistic embodiment of this progression.

Sentence (6) contains the phrase “la Morte, la belle morte, l'Adorable, la Mystérieuse, l'Inconnue” (“the dead woman, the beautiful, adorable, mysterious unknown”) which is foregrounded by parallelism: it is a list of nouns to portray the woman the madman imagines. Throughout the text, lists of parallel nouns such as those in sentence (6) are recurrent throughout the short story, and are thus not only foregrounded by parallelism on their own, but also because of the repetitions that echo throughout the story. Capital letters are used at the beginning of the nouns used to portray the woman. These capital letters are foregrounded by external deviation (in this instance lexical deviation specifically) as these nouns are not proper nouns, names or at the beginning of a sentence, as the language norms of French or English would dictate. It seems that by using a capital letter, the madman embodies the woman in

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<sup>7</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that the madman refers to “pied” (‘feet’) and “gorge” (‘throat’), which are other types of fetishism, thus further contributing to the omnipresence of the theme throughout the story.

terms of the quality given to each of those nouns. He seems to struggle to pinpoint what the woman is, and he needs to list those qualities, which further highlights his obsession. The capital letters could also elevate the status of the tress of hair: as well as being synecdochical the tress could also be allegorical in being the embodiment of those qualities, at least in the madman's mind.

The close-reading of the madman's interaction with the three objects demonstrates that he is indeed an objectophiliac and that there is a clear progression in his feelings and fetishist practices, which grow stronger with each object, further unsettling the reader. This topical progression is linguistically represented by the progression in figures of speech used to describe the objects. The watch is animated, brought to life in its description but given specific human attributes, whereas the wardrobe is personified and given human attributes. The tress of hair is synecdochical: the madman builds the idea of a woman from the tress; the tress is the embodiment of the dead women it once belonged to. But this progression is also illustrated through syntax, as shown by my analysis of sentences (5) and (6) in extract 2 and sentence (4) in extract 3. This answers my first research question (RQ1): the taboo topic of fetishism is likely to avoid censorship as it is conveyed implicitly through a linguistic progression of figures of speech.

Additionally, elements of language convey the madman's growing fetish practices, and hint at two possible interpretations as part of the progression observed. Indeed, since the madman was put in prison, there is no way of knowing if the synecdochical qualities of the tress were the climax of his fetish practices. The language devices in the text suggest otherwise and provide hints at two other plot twists: necrophilia and possession. The next section focuses on my second research question (RQ2) and argues that elements of language can be analysed to illustrate the story's two potential plot twists.

### ***The end of the progression? Guided interpretations of La Chevelure's ending***

This section analyses the two potential endings of the story, the end of the progression for the madman's fetishist tendencies. The story is open-ended, but elements of language guide readers into two possible

interpretations: necrophilia and possession. RQ1 and RQ3 are answered in this section.

### ***Necrophilia in La Chevelure***

The first possible interpretation of the story's ending is linked to the madman's ever-growing fetishist tendencies, which could evolve into necrophilia. Necrophilia is the love of the dead, usually defined as relations of a sexual nature with corpses (Stein, Schlesinger and Pinizzotto, 443). Most often, the motive for necrophilia is "an unresisting and unrejecting partner" (Rosman and Resnick, 153, 158). According to Pettigrew, there are two seminal works that claim to categorise the behaviours of necrophiles: the work of Rosman and Resnick and the work of Aggrawal which is based on Rosman and Resnick's and other seminal works (2-3). In both models, a category is created for *fantasizing* necrophiles, that is to say, people "fantasizing about sexual activity with a corpse, without carrying out any necrophilic acts" (Rosman and Resnick, 154). This classification in Rosman and Resnick's model is labelled as "necrophilic fantasy." Similarly, in Aggrawal's model it is labelled "Class III necrophiliacs: People having a necrophilic fantasy – necrophilic fantasizers" ("A New Classification," 317; "Necrophilia," 51-52).

These categories of necrophilic fantasy in both models fit the profile of the madman in Maupassant's story: he is attracted to objects that belong to dead women and through those objects he fantasizes about those dead women in a sexual way. The objects are synecdochical; vessels of the madman's fantasies for dead women. Since his fetishist tendencies evolve with each object, one can wonder if the madman would have become a true necrophile had he not been imprisoned beforehand. I argue that implicit elements of language suggest that he would become a *true* necrophile based on the comparison of the madman to the standard profile of necrophiles presented above, although this is speculation as the story is open-ended.

Multiple elements of language hint at the madman's possible fate of becoming a necrophile. First, the doctor paints him as a necrophile by stating: "Il est atteint de folie érotique et macabre. C'est une sorte de



necrophile” (paragraph 120 of the original French text), (“He has seizures of erotic and macaberesque madness. He is a sort of necrophile”). The doctor labels the madman as a “sort of necrophile” and describes his madness with the adjectives “erotic and macabresque” which are foregrounded by internal deviation, as they are articulated in positions of equity despite their unlikely and de-automized combination. The erotic and macabre characteristic of the madman’s mental state are linguistically on the same level and linked by the connective, “and.” The phrase “sort of” explains that the doctor is not certain of his diagnosis and does not know if the madman is, in fact, a true necrophile. It is not strictly a diagnosis in a clinical sense but instead indicates that the madman’s desire is not necessarily a dead woman, but his fantasies are the product of his anxiety (MacLachlan and Reid, 292). This would fit the category of the fantasising necrophile theorised by Rosnan and Resnick as well as Aggrawal.

Furthermore, at the end of the story the doctor states “Il n’y a pas que le Sergent Bertrand qui ait aimé les mortes” (paragraph 130 of the original French text), (“Sergeant Bertrand was not the only one who was in love with the dead”). This sentence is foregrounded by internal deviation, as the doctor refers to the “Sergeant Bertrand” who is so far unknown in the narration as he is not a character, and yet the madman’s behaviour of loving dead women is associated with Sergeant Bertrand’s similar behaviour by the phrase “pas le seul” (“not the only one”). To fully understand the comparison of the two men, one must be aware of the reference made regarding the Sergeant Bertrand. Known as The Vampire of Montparnasse, Sergeant Bertrand is one of the most well-known cases of necrophilia, (Stein, Schlesinger and Pinizzotto, 443; “Necrophilia,” 12-13). He was arrested in Paris, 1841, forty-three years before Maupassant’s publication of *La Chevelure*. By associating the madman with Sergeant Bertrand, the image of the Sergeant Bertrand’s actions and crimes are mirrored onto the madman. The doctor implies that the madman’s actions could have reached a similar level to those of Sergeant Bertrand, validating the idea that the madman’s fetishist tendencies were evolving at the time of his arrest and could have led to necrophilia and further unsettling readers.

The diary entry also uses a range of lexis which could suggest that the madman's objectophilia may eventually evolve into necrophilia. For instance, the lexical field of sexual relations is prevalent: “*érotique et macabre*” (“erotic and macabresque”), “*ses doigts un peu chauds*” (“warm fingers”), “*moiteur de la peau*” (“moisture from her fingers”), “*pénètre*” (“penetrates”), “*irrésistible désir*” (“irresistible longing”), “*caresser*” (“caressed”), “*enfonce mes lèvres dedans, pour la baiser, pour la mordre*” (“to bury my lips in it, to kiss it”) and the independent clause “*j'avais aux mains et au coeur un besoin confus, singulier, continu, sensuel de tremper mes doigts dans ce ruisseau charmant de cheveux morts*” (“in my hands and my heart I felt a confused, singular, constant sensual longing to plunge my hands in the enchanting golden flood of those dead tresses”).<sup>9</sup> This lexical field of sexual relations is paired with the lexical field of death as demonstrated in the following examples: “*les seins froids*” (“cold breasts”), “*femmes mortes*” (“dead women”) is repeated throughout the text, “*minait la chair, buvait le sang, éteignait la vie*” (“drinking his blood, snuffing out his life”), “*chair qui ne dût point pourrir*” (“body that would not suffer decay”). These two lexical fields are foregrounded by parallelism as they provide reoccurring themes that echo throughout the storyline and illustrates the madman’s necrophiliac tendencies through elements of language.

The madman’s fascination for objects and women of the past evolves rapidly throughout the narration, first involving a watch, then a wardrobe, and finally the tress of hair; all associated with women. Based on these linguistic elements, it might not be farfetched to assume the madman would succumb to his obsession, and eventually become a true necrophile. This is an assumption since the madman was arrested before the situation reached this potential ending. Readers therefore have to decide for themselves if the madman was bound to become a true necrophile as opposed to remaining a fantasising one.

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<sup>9</sup> As this is a lexical field looking at a running theme, those references are from the entire story. The original French version of the text can be accessed here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56374/56374-h/56374-h.htm>; The English translation of the text can be accessed here: [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H\\_4\\_0085](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H_4_0085). The text is Public Domain.

### ***A Contagious Obsession***

The title of the story *La Chevelure* (“a tress of hair”) clearly indicates that the focal point of the story revolves around the lock of blond hair and how characters interact with it. The impact the tress of hair has on the madman is discussed at length, however, the tress also seems to leave an impression on the narrator. This leads to the second possible interpretation of the story: the tress’s ability to possess men. This possible interpretation has warranted discussion by literary critics and academics (Benhamou, 82, 86), but so far no linguistic analysis has been conducted to explain the link between the madman and the narrator’s fate. This section aims to rectify that by providing a stylistic analysis to observe the symmetry between the two characters’ interactions with the tress.

The madman seems to have little control over his obsession for the tress of hair. His fetish is primitive and instinctive. This is showcased by the omnipresence of the senses in lexical fields throughout the text. For example, the sense of smell “parfum” (“perfume”), “odeur” (“smell”); the sense of taste “goûtant” (“tasting”), “buvais” (“drank”), “mordre” (“bite”); the sense of sight “regardant” (“looking”), “revoir” (“have another look”); and the sense of touch “carresse” (“caress”), “touchant” (“touched”), “prendre dans mes mains” (“take in my hands”) illustrate that the madman describes his experience with the tress in his diary through his senses. This is also the case for the narrator who uses his senses to narrate the story, as the madman did, thus creating a foregrounded parallelism between the two men. The narrator uses terms such as “yeux effarés” (“astonished eyes”) for his sense of sight; “crie” (“cry”), “hurlement” (“howl”) his sense of hearing; “toucher carressant” (“feeling its soft, light touch on my hand”) for his sense of touch.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, both men use similar expressions to describe their first interaction with the tress: the term “frisson” (“shiver”) for the madman and “frémis” (“shiver”) for the narrator. This repetition is foregrounded by parallelism as it creates a common theme and sheds further light on their similar experiences. Both men also mention their heartbeat in their interactions with the tress thus creating another parallelism: the

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<sup>10</sup> Same remark as previous footnote.

madman states “mon coeur se mit à battre” (“my heart began to beat”) whereas the narrator states “je restai le coeur battant” (“my heart beating”). Both men use the verb *shiver* and described their respective heartbeat at the touch of the tress, which denotes the recurrent parallelism and idea that the tress has captivated the narrator in a similar fashion to the madman. Moreover, sexual terms are used by the narrator to describe his interaction with the tress, which creates another parallelism with the madman: (“penetrate”), “impusisante” (“impotent”), “désir” (“longing”), “envie” (“desire”) to describe their physical connection to the tress. These innuendos suggest the potential objectophilia tendencies of the narrator, reflecting the madman’s.

The narrator uses similar sentence structures as the madman. Indeed, both men use rhetorical question and exclamations, and they use lists to describe how they feel about the tress. The madman lists “au malaise par ce contact frois, glissant, irritant, affolant, délicieux” (“feel uncomfortable at the cold, slippery, irritating, bewildering contact”) and the narrator states “ému d’étonnement, d’horreur et de pitié” (“filled with astonishment, horror and pity”). These lists are foregrounded by parallelism due to the symmetry they provide between the two men’s experiences. In fact, both men use similar syntax and clauses to express their feelings of disbelief. The madman states his disbelief that the tress was taken away from him, whereas the narrator states his disbelief that the tress exists, as shown by those two phrases:

**Madman:** “Mais on l’a vue ... on a deviné ... on m’ l’a prise ...”  
(paragraph 130 of the original French text), (“but they saw h – – they guessed – they arrested me”);

**Narrator:** “Mais... cette chevelure... existe-t-elle réellement?”  
(paragraph 131 of the original French text), (“but – that tress – did it really exist?”).

The phrases are constructed with foregrounded parallel structures that mirror each other. Indeed, both use ellipsis (or hyphens in the English translation) in a similar fashion and start with the same coordinating conjunction “mais” (“but”). The similarity in the syntax of the language of both men highlights the symmetry of their interaction with the tress and

their feelings of disbelief.

Furthermore, throughout the text, the madman uses oxymorons when referring to his experience with objects, particularly the tress of hair.<sup>11</sup> For example, he says “heureux et torturé” (“happy and tormented”) to portray his relationship with the tress. Similarly, the narrator uses the alliterated oxymoron “de dégoût et d’envie” (“disgust and desire”) to portray the impression the tress makes on him. Since they associate opposite concepts, the oxymorons are foregrounded by external deviation. However, the fact that both men use them in the same context foregrounds these oxymorons by parallelism and creates a pattern. Additionally, both men use similar similes to describe the physical aspect of the tress of hair. The madman describes it as “comme la queue en feu d’une comète” (“gleaming like the tail of a comet”) whereas the narrator describes it as “comme un oiseau d’or” (“like a golden bird”). Interestingly, both comparisons provide the image of a bright flying object. This further indicates that both men experience similar first impressions of the tress of hair. These deautomatized patterns show how both the madman and the narrator fall under the spell of the tress, further articulating the theme of fetishism and its illusion.

Now that I have established the similarities between the two men’s experiences with the tress, I can explain how it contributes to the second possible interpretation of the story: the tress of hair can possess men, and ultimately will possess the narrator as it did the madman. The lexical field of possession is prevalent throughout the story (“possédé” (“madman”), “possession” (“possession”), “possédé” (“possessed”). Although there is no way of knowing whether the narrator becomes possessed by the tress of hair, it is significant to note that patterns of symmetry can be observed between the narrator and the madman. These linguistic patterns could symbolise a thematic pattern of possession, thus hinting at the narrator’s fate. The fact that the madman is possessed by the tress of hair and the narrator shares similar linguistic patterns to the madman, could be the highest level of the progression on the ladder of taboo themes contained within the story. The summum of this evolution

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<sup>11</sup> Those oxymorons occur throughout the story, see previous footnote.

of taboo themes is the tress's ability to possess. Possession as a general theme deals with religious stigma and brings a dimension of the supernatural to the story, thus making it the most farfetched taboo amongst the others present in the story (Benhamou, 78). Indeed, the supernatural aspect of possession is more farfetched than the other paraphilias discussed so far because, arguably, possession is not real, whereas the other fetishes are. It also illustrates that the madman's evolution is indeed a progression: he goes from the least to the most stigmatised paraphilia. This progression is linguistically represented, particularly through figures of speech, and the possible endings are conveyed through implicit elements of language to avoid representing taboo topics directly, and thus avoiding censorship.

In this section, I conducted a stylistic analysis of *La Chevelure* to examine the themes and interpretations observed in literature and psychology. The key themes of objectophilia, fetishism, necrophilia and possession are explored through a linguistic progression of imagery and other elements of language such as parallelisms and lexical fields convey these stigmatised topics in the story in an implicit way, which not only allows for an open-ended story, but also allows the story to be published without censorship. In the last section of this paper, I discuss the perceived moral of the story and the language used to present it to readers. Indeed, readers are invited to infer that the evolution of obsession can impact everyone, and therefore the taboo themes of the story could be destigmatised. This perceived moral, although open to interpretation, can be used to present the story in schools as the story is part of the French Curriculum (Eduscol).

### **Discussion**

Despite the taboo themes recurring in *La Chevelure*, the story was published without censorship at the time and is presently used for teaching and learning (Eduscol). I argue that one of the contributing factors to allow for the publication is what can be considered as the perceived moral of the story. The text invites readers to infer this moral with the last sentence of the story "l'esprit de l'homme est capable de tout" (paragraph 131 of the original French text), ("the mind of man is capable

of anything”). In this sentence, ‘man’ is not defined specifically, making this statement a generalisation about mankind, and thus bringing a moral dimension to this sentence. The moral rationalises the madman’s story as it removes the factors of choice and control in his narrative, and the take-away message of the story shows that the madman’s predicament could potentially happen to anyone, thus removing some of the stigma that comes with those paraphilias.

The madman seems to rationalise his actions by providing spatial and temporal deictic terms to illustrate the routine of his life. The madman’s diary begins with a detailed narration: “des heures et des heures” (“hours and hours”), “pendant huit jours” (“for eight days”), “le lendemain” (“the following day”). However, the diary escalates to an obsessive testimony: “à tout moment” (“every moment”), “partout” (“everywhere”), “tous les soirs” (“every evening”).<sup>12</sup> The deictic terms show the madman’s growing obsession for the tress. He kept a diary to rationalise his actions and cope with his confused feelings, but it eventually spiralled out of control, just as his behaviour towards the tress did (Benhamou, 91). It could also be the testimony of a young man using the diary to relive his time with the tress.

In the diary, the madman uses the second person, almost addressing readers: “il vous séduit, vous trouble, vous envahit” (“it charms you, disturbs you, fills your thoughts”), “son charme entre en vous” (“the enchantment of it penetrates your being”), “un besoin de possession vous gagne” (“a longing to own it takes possession of you”).<sup>13</sup> Using the second person includes readers in the action as a way to help them understand the inner struggle the madman goes through. The pronoun “on” is also used, meaning “we” or in this instance “one:” “on regarde un objet” (“one gazes at an object”), “on l’aime déjà, on le désire, on le veut” (“one loves it, one desires it, one wishes to have it”), “on le caresse de l’oeil” (“one looks at it tenderly”).<sup>14</sup> Using the pronoun “on” is noteworthy because of its double nature: it can be a personal pronoun used in lieu of “nous” the second person plural; but it can also be an indefinite pronoun. In this

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<sup>12</sup> Those deictic terms occur throughout the story.

<sup>13</sup> The short story is a diary entry from paragraphs 121 to 130 of the original French text.

<sup>14</sup> Same remark as previous footnote.

particular instance, it is difficult to observe if the pronoun “on” is used in reference to the madman or if it is a general statement is applicable to anybody in a similar predicament. The madman seems aware of the taboo nature of his fetish practices, and the use of the pronoun ‘on’ can be seen as a way to rationalise his actions and a way of making it a generality observed by all: it is no longer “I” but every “one.”

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Maupassant’s *La Chevelure* is a popular short story that avoided censorship at the time of publication despite the taboo topics it explores, and features, as part of the French National Curriculum (Eduscol). Academics in the fields of literary and psychology (Benhamou, Apter, Cogman, amongst others) have offered their analysis and interpretation of the key themes of the story, but no comments were made on the language and devices used to convey those themes. This paper aimed to support the key themes of fetishism observed by literary and psychological research. The stylistic analysis conducted uses the theory of foregrounding to observe the key elements of language used in the story. This allows us to not only illustrate how the themes are presented throughout the narrative, but also to evidence that a linguistic progression is used to mirror the madman’s evolution into obsession and fetishism (RQ2). This linguistic progression uses lexical fields, syntax and figures of speech such as animation, personification and synecdoche to foreground the madman’s progression into fetishist practices. This progression features the taboo topics explored in the story implicitly, leaving the story open-ended and ultimately allowing contemporary publication and the teaching of the story in the present (RQ1). Readers are guided through implicit language features into interpreting the story in two ways through this progression: necrophilia and possession (RQ3). Nonetheless, the resounding message remains the climax of the thematical progression explored in the story. Despite the taboo nature of the themes merging from the plot, they can happen to anyone, including readers.



## APPENDICES

Original French by Maupassant published in 1884.

For the original French version of the text, all references are from paragraphs 119-131 available to be viewed on Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56374/56374-h/56374-h.htm>) as the text is Public Domain.

Official English translation by McMaster (“A Tress of Hair”).

For the English translation of the text, all references can be viewed on Project Gutenberg ([https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H\\_4\\_0085](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3090/3090-h/3090-h.htm#2H_4_0085)) as the text is Public Domain.

### **Appendix 1: Extract 1 from *La Chevelure* (paragraph 122)**

Elle était si mignonne, si jolie, avec son émail et son or ciselé.(1) Et elle marchait encore comme au jour où une femme l'avait achetée dans le ravissement de posséder ce fin bijou.(2) Elle n'avait point cessé de palpiter, de vivre sa vie de mécanique, et elle continuait toujours son tic-tac régulier, depuis un siècle passé.(3) Qui donc l'avait portée la première sur son sein dans la tiédeur des étoffes, le cœur de la montre battant contre le cœur de la femme?(4)

*It was so tiny, so pretty with its enamel and gold chasing. And it kept time as on the day when a woman first bought it, enraptured at owning this dainty trinket. It had not ceased to vibrate, to live its mechanical life, and it had kept up its regular tick-tock since the last century. Who had first worn it on her bosom amid the warmth of her clothing, the heart of the watch beating beside the heart of the woman?*

### **Appendix 2: Extract 2 from *La Chevelure* (paragraphs 123-124)**

Pourquoi le souvenir de ce meuble me poursuivait-il avec tant de force que je revins sur mes pas?(1) Je m'arrêtai de nouveau devant le magasin pour le revoir, et je sentis qu'il me tentait.(2)

Quelle singulière chose que la tentation!(3) On regarde un objet et, peu à

peu, il vous séduit, vous trouble, vous envahit comme ferait un visage de femme.(4) Son charme entre en vous, charme étranger qui vient de sa forme, de sa couleur, de sa physionomie de chose; et on l'aime déjà, on le désire, on le veut.(5) Un besoin de possession vous gagne, besoin doux d'abord, comme timide, mais qui s'accroît, devient violent, irrésistible.(6)

*Why did the remembrance of that wardrobe haunt me with such insistence that I retraced my steps? I again stopped before the shop, in order to take another look at it, and I felt that it tempted me.*

*What a singular thing temptation is! One gazes at an object, and, little by little, it charms you, it disturbs you, it fills your thoughts as a woman's face might do. The enchantment of it penetrates your being, a strange enchantment of form, colour and appearance of an inanimate object. And one loves it, one desires it, one wishes to have it. A longing to own it takes possession of you, gently at first, as though it were timid, but growing, becoming intense, irresistible.*

### **Appendix 3: Extract 3 from *La Chevelure* (paragraphs 129)**

Les baisers dont je la réchauffais me faisaient défaillir de bonheur; et je l'emportai dans mon lit, et je me couchai, en la pressant sur mes lèvres, comme une maîtresse qu'on va posséder.(1)

Les morts reviennent!(2) Elle est venue.(3) Oui, je l'ai vue, je l'ai tenue, je l'ai eue, telle qu'elle était vivante autrefois, grande, blonde, grasse, les seins froids, la hanche en forme de lyre; et j'ai parcouru de mes caresses cette ligne ondulante et divine qui va de la gorge aux pieds en suivant toutes les courbes de la chair.(4) Oui, je l'ai eue, tous les jours, toutes les nuits.(5) Elle est revenue, la Morte, la belle morte, l'Adorable, la Mystérieuse, l'Inconnue, toutes les nuits.(6)

*I almost lost consciousness as I kissed it, I took it back with me to bed and pressed it to my lips as if it were my sweetheart.*

*Do the dead come back? She came back. Yes, I saw her; I held her in my arms, just as she was in life, tall, fair and round. She came back every evening--the dead woman, the beautiful, adorable, mysterious unknown.*

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