

MIXED SIGNALS IN
NORMAN MAILER'S
"LA PETITE BOURGEOISE"

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WHEN THINKING ABOUT THE SHORT STORY, the name of Norman Mailer does not immediately spring to mind. In musical terms, Mailer most often wrote symphonies, not string quartets. Yet, when he chose to, he was capable of chamber music.

The sweep, expansiveness, and breadth (*le souffle* as the French would say) required of the novelist stand in contrast to the requirements of the short story writer, mainly, restrictions of time, character, and theme. However, Mailer's unpublished postage stamp-size story, "La Petite Bourgeoise," affords an example of some of the qualities prized in an effective short piece.

Mailer favored French writers and prized the work of many nineteenth-century French authors. He joined his compatriots in his estimation of the greatness of Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, and Emile Zola. In fact, the title (not the content) of the story under discussion here, "La Petite Bourgeoise," has echoes of Flaubert's protégé, Guy de Maupassant, or even Alphonse Daudet. While the theme of the story remains a universal one: an encounter with a woman from the past, with whom one has had a passing flirtation, and the desire to pursue a liaison, the tone, diction, and slant of the story are clearly modern and contemporary.

The title of the piece is first and foremost pejorative. All of the writers mentioned above came from the bourgeoisie, as did Mailer, and spent their lives excoriating it and holding the mirror up to it in an aggressive effort to ridicule, shame, and expose its hypocrisy, complacency, and often mean-spiritedness.

To be bourgeois is the opposite of being a member of the clergy, the nobility, or the proletariat. Antonyms are artist, worker, peasant, anarchist, bohemian, and revolutionary. It is not difficult to see the obvious contempt Mailer has for this social, economic, and cultural group. Culture, aesthetic appreciation, and certain types of freedom cannot be purchased, all of which are apparent in the story. (One reason why Molière's play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is funny even before you read it, is that the title is an oxymoron. It is impossible to be bourgeois and a *gentilhomme* or gentleman, which loses its power in English. The root of gentleman, "ge," means innate; one is born or is not born noble. You cannot buy nobility—at least not in the etymological sense of the word.)

Mailer constructs a narrative that is sardonic, sarcastic, and heavy with irony. The main obsession uncovered is sexual: the attraction between the woman from his past and the narrator. He begins with a portrait of the object of his attraction, Rosalie. In the present, she is described as sexually "appetizing"; she has red hair (passionate) and blue eyes (cool), but her voice is throaty (sexy) and "she carries her body provocatively" (14). He says that she is "plump," but given the narrator's strong attraction to Rosalie, the word does not appear to be negative. She conjures up flesh—pink, rosy flesh, and voluptuousness. Although she emits mixed signals, her overarching sensuality dominates.

Rosalie is the French diminutive for Rose and connotes the eternal symbol of woman in poetry and romance writing; a rose is to be cultivated, cherished, and plucked. In "La Petite Bourgoise," the bloom is off the rose, and she has already been plucked. In addition, the scent of a rose is heavy and heady—evocatively filling the senses.

Mailer underscores her bourgeois background in the second paragraph of the story. The passage is sarcastically comic regarding the education of girls of her class; he speaks of "female institutions" run by "spinsters" that serve as preparation for marriage or if that fails, the ability to take stenography (14). Here Mailer's usual critically aggressive side appears. He attacks the whole system. The enumeration of the courses offered: English, French, silver-service and party management, along with stenography and typing (just in case) is distressingly funny. He proposes that the only course she has not forgotten is "flower arrangements" (14)—yet another link to her name. Despite the reader's reaction to the curriculum and the vocabulary, it must be admitted that both are quite accurate.

Already exposed to the prescribed education for Rosalie and its predictable result, an unhappy marriage, the core of the bourgeois background is uncovered in this paragraph. Rosalie had been attracted to her husband and saved her virginity for him; in the narrator's words, "she had become a bride expressly to be deflowered by him" (14)—the verb is noteworthy here. Robert, her husband, proves himself to be an inadequate lover; on her wedding night, Rosalie sheds tears in the darkness after he has fallen asleep and realizes that she had married for "that." In a contrary manner that characterizes her thinking, Rosalie bemoans the fact that Robert had not "forced her to go to bed" with him before marriage. Then she never would have married him! Because he "adored" her, he restrained himself in that regard. If only he hadn't been such a "boob," she never would have married him (14). So the basis of the sexual dissatisfaction and disappointment in the marriage only serves to underscore the bourgeois mentality and mores embraced by Rosalie herself, and her husband too. Nonetheless, she blames her husband for his inability to meet her expectations.

Rosalie continues in the marriage for two years, and once again, the enumeration of the activities in her life is deadening: living near her parents, shopping with her mother, playing bridge and Canasta with her girlfriends while her husband works in his father's store selling television sets and "electric cocktail mixers" (15). He appears to have remained clueless as to the source of his wife's discontent, and it is clear that no discussion of his failures in bed ever took place—another indication of bourgeois thinking: sweep the problem under the rug and never discuss it. It was, however, Rosalie who had the "courage" to end the marriage and in the screwy logic that pervades the story, it was either divorce or have a baby. Again, all of the details so far add up to indictments of the social, cultural, and therefore, anti-feminist aspects of the milieu that has produced Rosalie's as well as her husband's thinking. If Rosalie were not misled by the bourgeois principles of her upbringing (ditto for the husband), the ruin of their marriage or marriage itself might have been avoided. Even in "modern" America, especially the America of the 1950s, premarital sex was frowned upon.

The narrator moves on to their past brief encounters that included a few kisses. The reunion between the two occurs at a party. Only three characters perform in the drama: Michael, the narrator; Rosalie, and Thomas, Rosalie's escort, who is the sinister character in the story. Thomas has a kind of Nosferatu presence. He strikes the narrator as "deadly" with a "pale face and

straight black hair”, and “colorless grey eyes”; he speaks “softly.” He is also described as a “watchdog” who “possessed her by his presence” (15). Their discussion is trivial but disconcerting, centering on deodorants. For a writer whose olfactory sense is highly developed, Mailer renders this topic not just comic, but also a slam at Madison Avenue and its bourgeois advertising machine that aims at convincing people that they smell and need to remedy that state. (*All anti-sexual.*) Rosalie describes Thomas as “disgusting” because he takes “three showers a day,” the narrator instinctively feels that Thomas is “repulsive”—all this despite his fetish for cleanliness (15).

The narrator’s first reaction to the fetishism is to declare à la Lady Macbeth, “Out, out, damned spot” (undoubtedly correct) (15). The conversation sinks to the effectiveness of Mum underarm deodorant, Qwik-tips for cleaning the belly button, and a new product called “Ennds”—a pill that “dissipates all odors” (15). Ionesco could have written this passage. It is absurd. However, while it is funny, it shows a certain metamorphosis in Rosalie, when she declares that he makes her feel like a “sewer pot” next to him (15). No proper bourgeois woman would employ such a vile image about herself! It is also hinted and even stated directly that Thomas is homosexual. He giggles and lisps, and Michael finds him “unpleasant,” in addition to the already mentioned “repulsive” (15). Rosalie has clearly changed from her days in Westchester.

Mailer uses the adverb “furiously,” obsessed by the Furies, to describe Rosalie’s resentment of Thomas as the kind of man who wants to marry her (16). Is this a perfect sadomasochistic relationship? He a clean freak and she a “sewer pot” who wants to wallow in feces? At this point, a return to the title is necessary. *La petite bourgeoise* designates the woman whom Michael knew before their encounter. Rosalie has changed, a metamorphosis *has* occurred. Not only did she have the “courage,” Mailer’s word, to divorce her husband; she has clearly chosen a lifestyle that is far from bourgeois. She stayed in the marriage for only two years; many women from that era, or any other era, stay in similar marriages forever. Rosalie recognized her own sexual needs and took steps to fulfill them. She liberated herself from a mind- and body-numbing misalliance and has set off to pursue her natural instincts and perhaps her naturally unruly side. There is much left unsaid in the story, but this much is clear. The reader cannot know exactly what route Rosalie has followed to arrive at the unexpected reunion with Michael or how she came to be involved with Thomas. Much remains elliptical.

As to Michael, he fails to acknowledge the change in Rosalie and that she has sloughed off her old skin. He treats her as prey, and while he is in pursuit of her, she also pursues him. She has found a voice, and she acts on her desires. Not only do her blue eyes telegraph these feelings to Michael, she actually gives him her phone number, in front of the barrier to their real reunion, Thomas.

Thomas's omnipresence and his standing guard outside the bathroom door do not deter Rosalie from blatantly putting out the feelers for setting up a rendezvous with Michael. Prepared in advance for Thomas's watchfulness, Rosalie hands Michael her phone number and asks him to call. He says that he did not call right away because Rosalie had made the gesture to arouse jealousy in Thomas. Could be. It also shows the perversity of their relationship, but we know that Michael *did* contact her. This gesture is clear from the details of her marriage that he reveals in the third paragraph of the story. He says, "She was *eventually* to tell me in her husky voice about the marriage" (14). The reader is privy to Rosalie's prior dilemma because the details are provided in the early part of the story; so we know that they had at least one rendezvous after the party. Mailer's use of the word "eventually" gives it away. While the reader cannot know for certain, it seems likely that Rosalie and Michael had an affair.

A key word for the entire story appears in the first paragraph: "innuendo." The story reeks of innuendo. Rosalie is all innuendo, her body, her relationship with Thomas, her desire to reunite with Michael, the mixed messages she sends, and even Michael's eventual relationship with Rosalie after the party.

In the best sense of the French short story, Mailer presents a slice of life in this piece. However, as a modern American story, it is far more elliptical and requires an effort on the part of the reader to delve into or to supply some answers, if possible. In "La Petite Bourgeoise," the reader looks for clues and hints after the last word, "jealousy," and finds them embedded in the story itself (16). "Jealousy" remains unsatisfying.

The reader is also free to project the path that Rosalie's life may take. It does not seem likely that she will end gulping down handfuls of arsenic, as did a famous forebear, a victim of the results of bourgeois boredom. That fate, however, does not preclude Rosalie swallowing a handful of sleeping pills at some future date. That would do the trick—twentieth-century style! But there is no way to know. Looking to Mailer for help may work.

Not uncharacteristically, Mailer sandwiches an important statement on writing in an essay not concerned directly with writing. That nugget of interest and intent from the writer's point of view of various genres appears in Phillip Sipiora's edited volume, *Mind of an Outlaw*, originally a speech, "Myth versus Hypothesis", in which Mailer discusses the George W. Bush Administration and the U. S. involvement in Iraq. Mailer states: "So, I would claim that the most interesting bond between hypothesis and serious fiction is they both have something to say about sex and the social forms it takes. For a long time, I've amused myself with the notion that the poem, the short story, and the novel can be compared to different phases of sex" (585). He goes on to compare the short poem to a one-night stand, whether "brilliant or a bummer." He then proposes that "A love affair of reasonable duration is, all too often, like a short story . . . What characterizes most short stories is that they look to suggest something forthright by the end" (585). (By the way, marriage is the novel.)

With that in mind, Mailer's last line of the story takes on more meaning. He does make a "forthright statement," namely that Rosalie slipped Michael her phone number in order to arouse jealousy in Thomas. That may be partially true, given the wiles that she may have developed from her experience with men, but we know that it cannot be the entire motivation. She desires him. Her action is direct, rather than wily. It is the narrator, Michael, who misreads her motivation.

Despite the brevity of this story, which actually is more like a sketch or a minute waltz, it remains possible that this piece represents a love affair of "reasonable duration"—Mailer's phrase. Michael's earlier statement that Rosalie probably remembers "flower arranging" hints at that. Michael's inability to acknowledge that she has become liberated ahead of time and that stenography, silver service, and party management may no longer be part of her repertoire reveals a self-satisfied attitude on Michael's part aimed at keeping her bourgeois. Although it is the narrator who moves the notes around on the scale, he does not resolve the piece.

The fact that Mailer never included this piece in any of his collections is revealing. Michael Lennon tells us that Mailer's last short story was published in the December 1963 issue of *Esquire* (424). Lennon also quotes Mailer on his writing preferences: "The pleasures you get in writing are the pleasures of the marathon runner. I can't write anything in 5000 words" (424). Perhaps Mailer never published it because a) he tired of it, b) he for-

got about it, c) he never arrived at any resolution, or d) he avoided resolution. Based on the hints, clues, and information given in the story, it seems to me that the latter possibility is not likely—he avoided resolution. Michael does not marvel at the transformation of Rosalie from deluded bourgeois housewife to a woman who picks her prey too; he rather seeks a future meeting.

Given the probable date of the story (1951), Rosalie is in the avant garde of the 1960s—a woman who refuses to accept the fate of an unfulfilled marriage. She has succeeded in avoiding further traps and disappointments that bourgeois life holds for so many, especially for women. That does not eliminate entirely the possibility of sleeping pills down the line, but rather shows that she has rejected being frozen in a no exit existence. She impresses the reader as alive, full of movement, accepting of her natural body, and actually “quite appetizing.” It remains for her to switch from Mum to Chanel No 5.

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