

Bel ami



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

French 0080 December 13, 2004 The Devil's Workshop The American dream sustained by millions of immigrants in the last three centuries is built upon blind, optimistic faith that hard work and effort will bring about good fortune to good and righteous people. However, this dream does not always become reality and many times, it is the people who work the least who are the most fortunate in terms of wealth and success. In three famed French novels, the effects of money, power, and idleness in *Bel-Ami*, *The Immoralist*, and *The Vagabond* are made known as this degeneration of the morals and/or self-worth of the characters involved are depicted.

Maupassant's novel, *Bel-Ami*, tells the tale of Georges Duroy and his climb up the social ladder in the 1880's. At the beginning of the novel, Duroy is a simple clerk who works hard for very small wages and who is forced to husband his resources so that he can afford the rent for his apartment in the slums and his one meager meal per day. This existence bores and disgusts Duroy however, due to his lack of formal education and social connections he is unable to find a better paying position until his chance meeting with an old army friend, Forestier.

With a gift of forty francs for a set of evening clothes, he is catapulted into aristocratic society as he is invited to dine with Forestier, his wife, and several business colleagues and friends. Although his personal experiences are limited, he regales his fellow dinner guests with stories about his time spent in Africa and before the evening is over, he is commissioned for an article on a cavalryman's view of life in colonial Africa.

The journalist's position is drastically different from the occupation which he currently occupies given the flexibility with work and with an improved salary

and Duroy jumps at this opportunity to promote himself into a more respected job. However, he finds himself unable to compose the article that is requested of him and approaches his friend for help. When Forestier instructs Duroy to go to his wife for aid, Duroy was nervous “wondering what he was going to say and uneasy about the welcome he might receive” (34, Bel-Ami).

He is aware at this point that such behavior, visiting someone's wife early in the morning and while she is dressed in a negligee, is not appropriate. However, he is encouraged by both Forestiers and spends time with alone with Madeleine, an act which was not socially acceptable at the time, and stays until the article is completed by her. Again, Duroy's conscience forces him to hesitate signing his name to the article entirely composed by another, but he is compelled to by Madeleine. With the article written and completely disregarding this dishonesty, Duroy submits it to the newspaper as his own work.

This act of plagiarism is markedly the first step that Duroy takes up the social ladder and the first step down the ladder of morality. Duroy is engaged as an employee of 'La Vie Francaise', the newspaper where Forestier works, and the second installment of his series on Africa is requested of him the next day. This position offers him nearly twice his former pay in terms of salary alone and he is also offered commission per line per article. He starts his days at 3 pm each day, rather than at 10am and his line of work is significantly less strenuous than before.

However, on the first day when his article is printed, he quits his former job and spends the entire day buying frivolous items before going back to the

newspaper offices, sans article. He is briefly reprimanded for his laziness by Forestier and is sent on his first mission with another journalist, St. Potin, to interview two visiting dignitaries. On this outing, St. Potin 'shows Duroy the ropes' by taking him out for drinks and gossiping about everyone and everything involved in the paper. He criticizes M. Walter, the head of the paper, and pokes fun at him with Jewish stereotypes.

He openly makes inappropriate references to Mme. Forestier and her relationship with the Comte de Vaudrec, despite Duroy's position as a friend to her husband. Duroy, unaccustomed to such blunt and uncouth conversation topics experiences extreme discomfort and battles "an urge to insult and slap the face of this gossip-monger" (50, Bel-Ami). The meeting ends with St. Potin telling Duroy how he has no intention to actually interview the two dignitaries and instead will rewrite an old article from an interview with similar foreigners.

Again, Duroy is rather surprised but does not voice any opposition he may have to these dishonest acts. The next day, he is also informed that it is possible to get advances on one's salary at the newspaper, ridding Duroy of the necessity of waiting and saving his money. He continues his work at the paper and becomes a very well known reporter but due to his expenditures, the advances on his already increased salary are insufficient and he lives just as poverty-stricken as he did before, regardless of the change in his income. The next step that Duroy takes down the path of immorality is his association with Mme.

De Marelle, one of the women who he had met at his first dinner with Forestier. After visiting her, she invites him out to dinner with her and the

two Forestiers. He accepts and soon all four gorge themselves with delicacies, fine wines and champagnes, and make incredibly inappropriate sexual comments and advances to each other. When discussing love, Duroy is again shown as a bit of a romantic who believes that there is some goodness in the world when it is said that “[he] believed that [love] could last, creating a bond, a kind of tenderfriendship, a mutual trust” (64, Bel-Ami).

However, this is not enough to keep him from gossiping with the other three and he vocalizes his contempt for love and tenderness despite his beliefs. Shortly after, he and Mme. De Marelle become lovers and one result of this is another strain on Duroy’s already too scanty salary. She enjoys to be taken out and to experience life while he works to afford his rent and his meals. He quickly falls into debt with everyone and owes the most to the cashier office at the newspaper. After confessing this to her, he finds that Mme. De Marelle adopts the habit of leaving money around his apartment or in his clothing.

At first, he is mortified by this turn of events and his “ feelings in a turmoil of fury and humiliation” (82, Bel-Ami). He vows to return the money to her but instead spends it on lunch and paying off debts. Although he confronts her over the issue, Mme. De Marelle continues to leave him tokens of her appreciation. He is duly humiliated each time, but he does not return the money or refuse it. He becomes a prostitute for her and uses her money for all of his purposes, such as food, debts, and even sex from a prostitute at the Folies-Berger.

This descent into amorality continues as he continues to make more progress in climbing the corporate ladder. Duroy is eventually caught by

Mme. De Marelle when she discovers that he has been paying a prostitute with her gifts and he finds himself strapped for money. After Forestier refuses to lend him a substantial sum and insults him when Duroy doesn't perform his job well enough, Duroy almost immediately begins plotting against Forestier by thinking " You wait, I'll get you...I'm going to have your wife, old man" (88, Bel-Ami). Given that only shortly before he had been ready to hit the man who implied Mme.

Forestier's infidelity to her husband, Duroy's character has obviously changed. Until this point, the only revenge that Duroy sought was at his former place of employment when he insulted his boss and this thought marks the very beginning of the noticeable changes from his decent self to his corrupted and vile counterpart. Duroy continues on his ascent into society and eventually does obtain the hand of Mme. Forestier after her husband's death. He inherits his money, social position, and occupation and completely assumes Forestier's position in life.

He has achieved the life that he had set out to make for himself. However, he is haunted by the memories of the dead man and soon, the life that he has is insufficient for him. One of the biggest catalysts for Duroy's descent into amorality is the suspicion of his new bride; he comes to the conclusion that she has been unfaithful to him and he writes off all women, believing that " all women are whores, you have to use them and not give them anything of yourself" (181, Bel-Ami). He is embittered by this turn of events and becomes ruthless in his plans to achieve the most money and wealth that he can.

When Madeleine's patron, the Comte de Vaudrec, dies and she inherits all of his wealth, Duroy forces her to give him half of the sum. Duroy later turns to Mme. Walter, the wife of the head of the newspaper, and uses her to get the top of the company. After using and discarding her, he discards Madeleine after arranging to catch her in an act of infidelity. His lust for money and power ultimately bring about his immorality, while being one of the richest men in his circle. Money has ultimately corrupted him. In *The Immoralist*, Michel is a man of independent means.

Born into a middle class family, he does not have to struggle to make it into society as Duroy did. He already has a comfortable occupation and on his honeymoon, spends his wealth on things of comfort and pleasure. He travels south with Marceline, his new bride, and for one of the first times in his life, leaves his work of books and study behind him. On the way to his destination, he has a severe bout with tuberculosis and nearly dies. He reflects that he "worked to the end, did [his] duty resolutely, devotedly..." (19, *The Immoralist*) which reflects his lack of zest for life.

He resigns himself to death, but the care of his wife keeps him alive and helps him to recover. Marceline chooses a lovely location for him to recuperate but he shows little interest in his surroundings and is too exhausted to do any work of any kind. He states that "being is occupation enough" (22, *The Immoralist*). Michel is an idle man, a man who has never known what it is to truly work hard to achieve something. However, faced with his mortality, he develops a renewed zeal for life and begins to spend his wealth with more abandon than before.

On his return back to Europe, the architectural sites mean nothing to him any longer and he only wants to experience life at the fullest. He takes himself and Marceline to a farm that he possesses in Normandy and it is at that farm where he loses his idleness and becomes the best type of man that he ever is during the novel. One can argue that it is at this farm where he spends the majority of his time at work, at various occupations that require him to put forth manual labor rather than being lazy, and that is the cause of this semi transformation.

He is, however, called to accept a teaching position at one of the more prestigious universities in Paris and when he takes this position, begins his cycle downward. Going to Paris, he spends enormous amounts of money as he and Marceline struggle to furnish their new apartments, which “ the cost of furnishing the new apartment would exceed [their] income for the year” (88, *The Immoralist*). Rather than settling for what he could afford, Michel recklessly spends what he needs to get what he wants.

As his idle time increases, Marceline's health decreases and Michel uses her failing health as an excuse to quit his new job, for he has become bored and disillusioned with it, and drags her back to his farm in Normandy. No longer interested in working for the betterment of the property, Michel takes up with poachers and ruins his own lands, making them undesirable and causing them to lose whatever profits they had once made. It seems that his idle hands are aching to be occupied with some matter and given that he is no longer interested in working, he becomes a voyeur into the lives of the most debauched around him.



The farm is soon ruined under his direction and he forever ruins his relationships with the people who had worked for him and his father for years. He is confronted by one of the sons of his employee who tells him that it was [Michel] who taught [him] last year that property involves certain responsibilities - but [Michel] seems to have forgotten" (138, *The Immoralist*). Michel is not moved by this statement but rather becomes disgusted with his work and informs the grounds keeper that the farm is to be sold.

Despite Marceline's increasing health troubles, Michel picks up and leaves the farm as soon as he becomes disillusioned with it and with the people around him and drags Marceline on a trip through Europe and back south to where they had spent their honeymoon. On this flight, Michel has nothing to occupy his time or capture his interests except for multiple acts of immoral behavior. He spends his money recklessly, without abandon, and never takes into account Marceline's needs or desires. Instead, he constantly justifies his own selfishness by blaming these things on Marceline's needs.

Her health worsens as he drags her to climates not healthy for her ailing lungs, but he is so preoccupied with experiencing the debauched lifestyle that he does not care about it and refuses to acknowledge that he is slowly killing his wife. In a sick way, Michel seems excited by his prospect of wasting his riches for he claims that " A reversal of fortune...should teach as much as a reversal of health" (144, *The Immoralist*). Finally, his selfishness and inability to distinguish right from wrong cause the death of Marceline. Michel is left alone, without work or meaningful occupation.

However, instead of working or attempting to rebuild the life that he purposefully destroyed, he is content to do nothing except exist. At the end of the novel, he states that “ nothing discourages thought so much as this perpetual blue sky. Here any exertion is impossible, so closely does pleasure follow desire” (170, *The Immoralist*). This last statement of him shows truly how far he has descended into this state. *The Vagabond* is different from the aforementioned novels in that its main character is not one who does not appreciate the value of money or the importance of work.

Rather, its heroine, Renee Nere, works at first because she must but finally because she wants to rather than condemn herself to a life of servitude to a husband. Renee is a thirty-something divorcee who sings, dances, and acts in a second rate performing troupe and who is eventually courted by a rich, handsome man who embodies money and idleness. Rather than openly accepting the life of luxury he offers, Renee ultimately rejects him because he cannot understand her aversion to a married life in captivity.

Max, her suitor, is an extremely rich man who has no occupation at all and who lives off of the money provided to him by his family. Max cannot understand the importance of a job in Renee’s eyes and ultimately, it is this inability to comprehend her motives that cause their budding romance to fail. In a short passage, Renee displays her opinions on the effects of idleness on an actor. She states that she is touched by the concern of one of her colleagues who wants “ to save [her] from hard times and the idleness which demoralizes out-of-work actors, diminishing their powers and making them go to pieces” (101-102, *The Vagabond*).

She feels that it is necessary to keep oneself occupied and it is that reason as well as the fact that she does not want to repeat her past experiences with her ex-husband that she rejects Max's advances. The major conflict between the two is the impending tour of the theater group with whom Renee works. Many times in the novel, Max voices his desire for her to remain and to leave the theater and to accept a less strenuous life with him. However, Renee doesn't respect him for his self-imposed inactivity and she likens him to a prostitute as he is the first man she had ever met who was idle.

She states that " he has no profession and no sinecure behind which to conceal his lazy freedom" (140, *The Vagabond*). Max constantly asks her why she won't leave the industry and he often rebukes her for her occupation. She replies to him that he has " the means to live otherwise...but as for [her], what would [he] have [her] do" (143, *The Vagabond*). When he offers to provide for her, she finds the idea repugnant and humiliating. When discussing the plans for the tour, Renee and her mentor, Brague, begin to discuss her relationship with Max.

When Brague asks her what business Max is involved in, Renee replies, slightly embarrassed that Max does nothing at all. Brague finds that admission to be rather fascinating, stating that " it's staggering...that anyone can live like that. No office. No factory. No rehearsals. No racing stables" (163, *The Vagabond*). Neither of the two working people can possibly understand nor sympathize with the motives of a person who does not take part in the simple task of human work. Another source of conflict

between Max and Renee is the issue of money; Max has too much, Renee not enough.

An example of this problem is highlighted when Renee is packing for the tour and is planning to share a trunk with Brague in order to save on the costs. The total proposed sum to be saved is two hundred francs, but Max does not agree with such a situation and tells Renee that the situation was “sordid” and that “it’s all so paltry” (167, *The Vagabond*). She is horribly offended by this dismissive attitude to money, but she recognizes that Max would not “have learnt that money, the money one earns, is a respectable, serious thing which one handles with care and speaks about solemnly” (167, *The Vagabond*).

In the end, it is Max’s dismissive attitude to everything and his desire to control Renee that ruins their relationship; Renee goes on with plans to further her chosen career and leaves Max with best wishes for romance in his future. In *Bel-Ami*, *The Immoralist*, and *The Vagabond*, money and idleness are major factors that determine the path of each of the characters involved. In *Bel-Ami*, the more money Duroy obtains, the less work he does for it and his moral state shows much worse for the wear.

*The Immoralist* discusses Michel and how he becomes a degenerate being with self-imposed idleness and his strong desire to cast away all ties to his prior lifestyle. Renee in *The Vagabond* shows how self-reliance and independence is extremely vital to a successful relationship and how depending on one person for all of life’s pleasures can only lead to disillusionment and failure. These lessons, though not all good, are important to be learned in order to successfully prioritize one’s life.

Only one of the three characters above became financially successful and he ruthlessly sacrificed the reputations, happiness, and sanity of others in order to achieve his goals. Apparently, the 'American dream' does not always have the desired fairytale ending but one can derive this lesson from these tales; riches may not be guaranteed, but the chances of living a fulfilling life are greatly increased by keeping oneself occupied and focused on the future, rather than being lazy and uninvolved with life and the world around him. As can be concluded from these novels, idle hands are truly the Devil's tools.