LIKE DEATH
by Guy de Maupassant
Translated from the French by Richard Howard

$15.95 US • $21.95 CAN • Paperback • 240 pages

“The psychoemotional precision of Maupassant in an
elegant new translation… A finely shaded portrait of desire,
will, and the complex entanglement of love, set against cutting
social commentary from a realist master.” —Kirkus, starred review

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Olivier Bertin is at the height of his career as a painter. After making his name as
a young man with his Cleopatra, he has gone on to establish himself as “the chosen
painter of Parisiennes, the most adroit and ingenious artist to reveal their grace,
their figures, and their souls.” And though his hair may be white, he remains a
handsome, vigorous, and engaging bachelor, a prized guest at every table and salon.

Olivier’s lover is Anne, the Countess de Guilleroy, the wife of a busy poli-
tician. Their relationship is long-standing, close, almost conjugal. The countess’s
daughter is Annette, and she is the spitting image of her mother in her lovely
youth. Having finished her schooling, Annette is returning to Paris. Her parents
have put together an excellent match. Everything is as it should be—until the
painter and countess are each seized by an agonizing suspicion, like death.…
In its devastating depiction of the treacherous nature of love, Like Death is more
than the equal of Swann’s Way. Richard Howard’s new translation brings out
all the penetration and poetry of this masterpiece of nineteenth-century fiction.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role does satire play in the book?

2. How did you find that Olivier Bertin perceived himself, and how does that
differ from the way in which Maupassant portrays him in the book?

3. On page 89, Bertin observes the young marquis who will marry Annette, and
becomes “exasperated and disgusted as though someone had mistaken and violated
his rights, his mysterious and sacred rights.” Describe this moment and what it
reveals about the characters. To which “sacred rights” does Bertin refer?

4. Does Annette strike you as an active or passive character?

5. On page 150, Bertin thinks, “We love a type, that is to say, the union in one
signal person of all human qualities which separately may charm us in others.” Did
you find this explanation of love to be compelling? How does it manifest in the
novel?
6. Paintings and mirrors appear throughout Like Death. Describe the role that viewing plays in the book—what does it mean to look at oneself and to be observed by others?

7. Why do you think Maupassant chose to make Bertin a painter?

8. Discuss Maupassant’s portrayal of women in the novel. Did you find that there was a difference between how the male characters in Like Death view women and how Maupassant ultimately intended to describe the female characters?

9. The Countess’s husband, Monsieur le Comte de Guilleroy, is a minor character in the novel, and yet is present throughout. What did you make of him, and what is his purpose in the book?

10. Did you find the end of the novel satisfying? Did you feel sympathetic toward the Countess and Bertin?

FOR FURTHER READING

Alien Hearts
Guy de Maupassant
(translated by Richard Howard)
ISBN 9781590172605

Afloat
Guy de Maupassant
(translated and introduced by Douglas Parmée)
ISBN 9781590172599

The Unknown Masterpiece
Honoré de Balzac
(introduction by Arthur C. Danto, translated by Richard Howard)
ISBN 9780940322745

Count D’Orgel’s Ball
Raymond Radiguet
( foreword by Jean Cocteau, translated by Annapaola Cancogni)
ISBN 9781590171387