

# MARIVAUX'S LIFE OF MARIANNE

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## Part 1 – Presentation of the author

Many Memoir-Novels were published in the 1730s. Among them, we find Marivaux's *Life of Marianne*. Upon its publication, the book drew criticism because of the stylistic freedom granted to its narrator Marianne. Marivaux, who took the Moderns' side in the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, was criticised for writing in a style deemed too precious. On the other hand, he was also criticised for writing characters deemed not respectable enough.

First of all, who is Marivaux and what did he write? In 1731, when he published the first part of *The Life of Marianne*, whose different volumes came out up until 1742, Marivaux had already distinguished himself as a playwright. He notably wrote *The Surprise of Love* or *The Game of Love and Chance*, comedies that both reflect on the relations between feelings - especially feelings of love - and language, as in the ability to name, test, or even create that feeling using words. Marivaux developed this ethics, based on the observation of feelings, their complexity and their ambiguity, in his journals as well, composed of a plethora of texts in which he or his multiple narrators are often moralistic.

The two Memoir-Novels that Marivaux wrote during his career, *The Life of Marianne* and *The Fortunate Peasant* extend and deepen his analysis of the human heart in social relationships. Both novels mirror each other, as the former tells the story of a foundling convinced to be an aristocrat, and the latter, that of the rise of a peasant slowly climbing society's ladder. They both explore the metamorphosis undergone by these two characters, through their transition from one environment to another, a metamorphosis on which both narrators wonder tirelessly. At the end of their adventures, both heroes indulge in a long introspection. Now let's discuss more carefully Marivaux's *Life of Marianne*.

## Part 2 – Presentation of the novel

*Marianne's* story begins with a terrible accident. Among all the passengers who died in the attack of a coach by brigands, only one survivor is found, a baby whom no one can identify. Marianne is placed with a parish priest and his sister, in a very modest environment. But Marianne feels in herself a great finesse that leads her to believe she is from an aristocrat family. Drawing on this conviction, Marianne will have to make her way into the world, foiling the shenanigans of her protector, Monsieur de Climal, who hopes to seduce her; and revealing herself worthy of Monsieur de Valville's attentions, an aristocrat who is in love with her. We do not know the outcome of the plot since the novel was left unfinished.

We only know from the novel's title that Marianne eventually acquires the title of countess. But how did she become a countess? Through marriage or by having her parentage established? These two possible interpretations lead to different readings of the novel. Either Marianne is indeed, as she claims, of noble descent and in this case must seek to be recognised as such, or she is a parvenu seeking to seduce her entourage, as she seduces readers to make them adhere to her version of the story. So, there is always a suspicion hanging over Marianne's words, the reader is torn between feeling empathetic for the young woman's woes and being suspicious of Marianne when he notices

how much she controls her story and stages it multiple times in order to foster empathy. For instance, we see this in the well-known scene opening the second part of the novel in which Marianne, who has bought new clothes, goes to Mass where she does her best to capture the attentions of everyone around her.

So, it is possible that Marianne fibs about her origins to present herself in a favourable light. This ambiguity is never solved in the novel and raises the question of the character's value. Is Marianne's worth as a character found in her social status or is any character, even one that has no social legitimacy, able to interest the reader? Marianne answers this question by relying on her own qualities, including her style.

## Part 3 – A feminine voice

Indeed, Marianne can only rely on her narrative skills to sway the reader. Her story stands out because she develops a kind of intimacy with the reader. The novel is written in the form of a letter that Marianne addresses to one of her friends. At the very beginning of the novel, a character who introduces himself as the publisher, tells the story of how the manuscript was found in a newly acquired house. This trope of the found manuscript is a recurrent technique in Memoir-Novels. It allows for the text to be introduced as a true story, even if readers are not fooled. Nevertheless, it allows introducing a heroine who speaks freely, a freedom of tone not found much in novels of the time. At the beginning Marianne warns the letter's recipient that she will allow herself to digress through the story.

And she does often interrupt her story to comment on this or that situation, which gives the novel a great depth of analysis. The depth of analysis also comes from Marianne often letting other characters speak. Thus, an episode can be told from two different points of view, which questions the subjective vision of each; like the meeting between two characters for example, where we get the subjective thoughts of each character before hearing the truths of the other. Delegation of speech becomes particularly important in the last parts of the novel. Marianne meets a young nun, Tervire, whose story she tells, leaving her own unfinished. Actually, what we call *The Life of Marianne* rests on these multiple voices interweaving.

So what should we keep from Marivaux's *Life of Marianne*? In the end, the outcome of Marianne's journey isn't what's important. What interested Marivaux was his heroine's metamorphosis and the way she manages to comment her journey by reflecting on herself and on her interactions with other characters.