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Analyzing Jeanne's Character and its Tragic Elements in *Une vie* from Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's 'Three Elements' Perspective

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Abstract

This paper, following Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" theory, delves into the factors contributing to Aunt Jeanne's personality and her tragic fate. Commencing with an examination of Aunt Jeanne's familial and life context, alongside the historical backdrop and the experiences of female characters like Joanna and the Baroness, this study applies Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" - race, environment, and era - to facilitate a systematic analysis. This approach enables a deeper exploration of Aunt Jeanne's character and the tragic elements within her story. The study uncovered Aunt Jeanne as a tragic figure embodying trait such as timidity, sentimentality, low self-esteem, and heightened sensitivity.

Keywords: Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's 'Three Elements', *Une vie*, Aunt Jeanne, Character Image, Maupassant

I. Introduction

As a historian and literary theorist, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, initially proposed the "three elements" theory and authored the book titled "Philosophy of Art." This book, exemplifying the field of art, illustrates how race, environment, and era influence the evolution of art, considering aspects such as its origins, formation, and development. Nevertheless, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" theory extends beyond this and can also be employed for analyzing character traits in literary works. Being a representative work of naturalistic literature, *Une vie* emphasizes character individuality over typicality. Hence, building upon Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" theory, it enables a more comprehensive examination of the character composition of the "transparent person," Aunt Jeanne, facilitating a deeper analysis of the factors contributing to her personality and tragic fate.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "Three Elements" Study

As the founder of the philosophy of art, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine put forward the theoretical system of the three elements earlier, and this doctrine has been preliminarily explained in his early thesis "On the Allegory of La

Fontaine", which was comprehensively elaborated and analyzed in "Philosophy of Art". In this book, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine repeatedly mentioned the three basic concepts of "race," "environment," and "age," which provided examples and references for later studies of philosophical theories.

In his paper, Zhou Junping (1991) firstly distilled and summarized the "internal structure" outline of racial elements, pointing out that Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's emphasis on the formation and development of physiological and psychological structures lacks a scientific and objective theoretical basis. Secondly, when discussing the element of environment, he describes in detail the concept and classification of environmental elements proposed by Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, and argues the rationality of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "sum of external forces" and "spiritual climate" from three aspects, namely, the connection between the living environment and the character of each ethnic group, and the influence of different policies and civilizations. The rationality of "external forces" and "spiritual climate". Furthermore, as a result of the joint action of internal and external forces, the element of era has more similarities with the element of environment, but Hippolyte Adolphe Taine does not strictly divide the two, and there are many different interpretations of the definition of "era", which is obviously contradictory. Finally, Zhou Junping thinks that Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" still has other shortcomings, "In him, the role, status and relationship of various factors are not clear, and sometimes even the cart is put before the horse, and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine has never found the most fundamental economic factors to unify them. As a socio-historical view this is an Achilles heel".

Yang Lixiang (2019) scholar summarizes the limitations of the three-factor theory into three points, arguing that it "ignores the economic situation of the society; ignores the subjective initiative of human beings; and lacks the internal study of the artwork". It points out that the ideology of superstructure and social economy complement each other, and takes the ancient Greek civilization as an example to elaborate the correlation between the developmental changes of the society and the productive forces and production relations. In addition, as the main body of social practice, human beings have rich emotional aspirations, and art works are the embodiment of the subjective emotions of the creators, while too much conceptualization and abstract analysis will lead to the reduction of the value of art itself, so exploring the intrinsic value and significance of art works is also very important.

2.2 A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Maupassant's *Une vie*

Maupassant's writings have always been widely explored and studied in the academic world, and there are 301 articles about such studies. This paper, however, searches the CNKI with one of Maupassant's writings, *Une vie*, as the keyword, and only 14 related articles have been published. This indicates that there is still a lot of space to be explored in the research on *Une vie*. Throughout the 14 studies, most of them focus on two aspects.

The first research theme is the study of its tragedy, "the essential attribute of tragedy is expressed in the tragic conflict, according to Hegel, tragedy is a kind of social conflict, because the irreconcilable contradiction makes the characters collide with the society, the environment, and themselves" (Zhang Lingxia, 2014). According to Xie Chun (2019), the tragedy of *Une vie* is rooted in "the turbulent social background of the nineteenth century and the widespread dissemination of pessimistic philosophical ideas" and the constant collision between Maupassant's own tragic experience and pessimistic ideas, which led Maupassant to transform his pessimism into the tragic life that landed on the protagonist.

The second theme is the study of the female figure, analyzing the heroine and the difficult situation of French women in the nineteenth century from different perspectives. Song Jun (1998) studied the heroine Joanna from the perspective of Sigmund Freud psychoanalysis, and believed that "a healthy personality requires the synergy of superego, ego, and self, and Joanna's overpowering superego power led to her spiritual loneliness and indulgence in fantasies; and the energy of her ego, which rested on irrational motherly love, led to the tragedy of being deserted by her son for the latter part of her life". Wang Ya and Yang Tingfang both started from the philosophical thought of Simone de Beauvoir, and believed that the influence of religion, the compulsion of custom and the suppression of male power were the root causes of the tragedy of women at that time.

Based on most of the articles that have examined the heroine Joanna and, by extension, most of the women, the study of the female figure of Aunt Jeanne in *Une vie* is the focus of our article. However, the studies in this direction still mainly analyze the tragedy briefly in the social context of nineteenth-century France. They believe that Aunt Jeanne, like most women, was influenced by religion, male power and formed a tragic image. It can be said that almost no scholars have analyzed the tragedy of Aunt Jeanne as a woman in detail from the point of view of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements".

2.3 Purpose and significance of the study

As a historian and literary theorist, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine initially proposed the doctrine of the "three elements" and authored the book *Philosophy of Art*. In this book, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine takes the field of art as a representative, and argues the influence of race, environment, and era on the development of art from the perspective of origin, formation, and development. However, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" theory does not stop here; it can also be used to explore characterization in literary works.

Une vie is one of the most influential of all the novels written by Maupassant in his life, which demonstrates his superior creative ability in long novels. With a simple and delicate style of writing, the novel tells us about the bitter life of a woman in rural Normandy, which resonates with countless readers.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the tragedy of the existence of Aunt Jeanne, a "transparent person", as the object of study. From the perspective of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements", we will further analyze the reasons for the formation of Aunt Jeanne's character and explore the difficulties and tragedy of the existence of this kind of female characters. As a masterpiece of naturalistic literature, *Une vie*, what it promotes is the individuality of characters rather than typicality. Therefore, on the basis of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's theory of "three elements", it will help us to have a more comprehensive view of the characterization of Aunt Jeanne, the "transparent person".

The significance of this paper is that it can integrate domestic scholars' research on Maupassant's *Une vie* and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements", and analyze the composition and tragedy of female characters in *Une vie* on this basis, so as to make up for the blankness of the research on Aunt Jeanne's female characters in *Une vie*. In addition, it can also further appreciate the tragic fate of such women in the time and provide a new perspective for readers to read *Une vie*. At the same time, it also provides some references for thinking about women's situation in today's time.

3. Natural instincts formed under the influence of racial factors

In The Preface to the History of English Literature, the term 'race' pertains to innate and genetic inclinations (Taine, 1985). It can be inferred from this that Hippolyte Adolphe Taine categorized the concept of race into two components: innate and genetic. Innateness can be defined as an inherent trait that sets individuals apart from others. Heredity is a trait shared among individuals of the same lineage. The concept of race allows us to gain insight into the seemingly unremarkable character of Aunt Jeanne in 'One Life.' She possessed a timid and fearful disposition by nature and a sentimental inclination through her lineage. In the works of Maupassant, Aunt Jeanne's portrayal as the 'invisible person' vividly emerges from the pages.

3.1 Timid nature under innate influence

Aunt Jeanne was inherently unobtrusive and consciously maintained this 'invisible' persona throughout her life. As a child, Aunt Jeanne was neither attractive nor mischievous; instead, she appeared as an emotionless presence, to the point that no one showed her affection through hugs or kisses. Her ability to engage in social interactions was limited. Maupassant (2022) noted, 'She was extremely timid, even in the presence of her sister and brother-in-law.' Behaviorally, Jeanne consistently remained reserved and obedient, preferring the shadows. Her footsteps were always hurried and soundless, and she avoided touching anything to evade notice. It is notable that Aunt Jeanne was present in many situations, yet Maupassant succinctly captured this with the phrase 'hiding, hiding.'

When Joanna suspected Julien of feigning illness due to cheating, Jeanne, who wished to offer care, discreetly positioned herself by the hallway doorway; during Joanna's childbirth, both the cook and Aunt Jeanne silently concealed themselves at the doorway; and at her sister Adelaide's funeral, Jeanne, overwhelmed with grief, concealed herself behind Joanna. It was only when Joanna embraced her that Jeanne found solace in that brief hug. Without Joanna's embrace, Jeanne might have resumed her customary hiding in the shadows, as she did while silently observing her sister's funeral and leaving silently after Paul's baptism. When the topic of Paul's education arose, Aunt Jeanne was so frightened that she sought refuge in a dimly lit area. On the eve of Joanna's wedding, Aunt Jeanne, in her role as an aunt, should have offered verbal congratulations to Joanna's family, but her timidity led her to sequester herself in her room, suppressing her excitement as she meticulously prepared gifts.

Her timidity extended beyond merely being an unobtrusive presence; it bordered on a submissive disposition. Upon her father's demise, Aunt Jeanne did not move in with her sister and brother-in-law. Instead, she opted to reside in a convent, believing that she would burden others and therefore refrained from causing any inconvenience. Soon after, Julien and Joanna noticed Aunt Jeanne waiting for them in the cold weather. However, they chose to walk on the grass, disregarding her presence, until the cold air compelled them to return home. Aunt Jeanne, exhausted, refrained from making any demands and silently awaited the young couple. Nonetheless, the arrival of Paul drew Aunt Jeanne out of her 'corner,' and she became inseparable from him, assisting with recording Paul's growth, packing his clothes, and tending to trees and vegetables together. Nonetheless, despite Aunt Jeanne's efforts to bring joy to Paul, he remained oblivious to her intentions. For instance, while Paul readily expressed affection for his grandfather when seated on his knee, Aunt Jeanne felt deeply hurt by the minimal attention she received from Paul. The first time Paul left for school with the family, he forgot Aunt Jeanne entirely and failed to bid her farewell with a hug. It is evident that this 'transparent' disposition appears to be inherent in Aunt Jeanne, causing her to abstain from participating in social gatherings and inadvertently diverting people's attention away from her.

3.2 Family personality formed under genetic influence

From a genetic perspective, Mrs. Adelaide, Joanna, and Aunt Jeanne share a common trait: they are all sentimental. Adelaide brims with poetic passion. During her youth, she immersed herself in romantic tales, vividly recalling the romantic plots within them. She often daydreamed of assuming the role of the story's heroine, weeping alongside the protagonist. In her final days, she revisited 'Corina' and 'Collections of Meditation' repeatedly. 'Corina' recounts the story of a gifted, romantically inclined poetess who endures multiple love-related trials and eventually succumbs to melancholy. Such a passionate woman seemed to epitomize Mrs. Adelaide's idealized woman. This turbulent love story also evoked memories of her own intense and beautiful love affairs. She cherished love in her fantasies and longed for it in reality, and the 'souvenir' she frequently revisited was a testament to this.

Joanna also inherited her family's sentimental disposition, a trait that developed through both the Baron's personal ideals and her innate nature. As stated in the book, 'Although she differed from her mother in other aspects, she instinctively inherited this penchant for fantasy and sentimental temperament (Maupassant, 2022).' Joanna not only preserved her mother's antiques but also set aside her own as keepsakes. When she embarked on her first sea voyage with her father and Julien, her emotions mirrored the fish they encountered. The sight of fish filled her with a mixture of joy and sorrow, exhibiting 'primitive and childlike joy (Maupassant, 2022).' Yet, as the fish disappeared, a profound sadness overcame her. After arriving at Baiyang Villa, she became completely enamored with nature, experiencing unbridled happiness when in contact with it. Horseback riding outings with Gilbert's family moved her to tears, as the beauty of nature stirred deep emotions within her.

Aunt Jeanne also inherited the family's sentimentality. When Julien briefly remarked, 'Aren't these lovely and petite feet feeling cold at all (Maupassant, 2022)?' Aunt Jeanne, engrossed in her knitting, mistook his words as concern for her and was overcome with a sense of loss and sadness. She had never experienced such gentle care from anyone before. Even if it wasn't intended for her, she believed that no one had ever cared for her. Additionally, during the Baroness's passing, Joanna, Aunt Jeanne's junior, embraced her warmly, causing 'the old lady [to be]

so moved that she almost fainted (Maupassant, 2022).¹ Aunt Jeanne's sentimentality unconsciously magnified the emotions around her, often causing others to project their feelings onto her involuntarily.

In addition to sentimentality, there is an equally subtle family trait of timidity and cowardice. The Baron aspired for Joanna to become a 'happy, kind, upright, gentle, and affectionate woman (Maupassant, 2022)' from a young age. Consequently, Joanna spent much of her youth in a convent, remaining sheltered from the world and unprepared to navigate life's uncertainties. She repeatedly acquiesced to her husband's frugal arrangements at Baiyang Villa, ultimately trading her customary Normandy cake for plain toast each morning. When Rosalie fainted, she panicked and waited for Julien to resolve the situation, standing helplessly by. In the face of Lian's infidelity, she remained apathetic, leading the priest to chastise her for her cowardice and ineptitude. Aunt Jeanne, too, held a marginalized position within the family, evident in the alteration of her name. Originally bearing the beautiful name 'Liss,' it was changed to the inconspicuous 'Aunt Jeanne' since there was no prospect of her remarriage. As the Baron put it, 'Let Jeanne wait for them (Maupassant, 2022),' to which the timid Jeanne obediently complied. Fearful of others' judgments and religious constraints, she fervently persuaded Joanna to have Paul fulfill her religious obligations.

Hence, the inherited sentimentality from the family renders them, especially Aunt Jeanne, highly attuned to their surroundings and emotions, often leading to mixed feelings over trivial matters. Simultaneously, their timidity and cowardice hinder Aunt Jeanne from asserting herself against others' demands. Upon realizing the feelings of those around her, the timid and cowardly Aunt Jeanne amplifies her unmet need for love, seeking affection to no avail. In contrast, Aunt Jeanne's character ultimately leads her to a tragic fate.

4. Characters shaped by environmental factors

In his *Preface to the History of English Literature*, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1985) contends, 'Because man is not isolated; he is surrounded by nature and other humans. Chance and secondary inclinations obscure his innate tendencies, and when the material or social environment influences the essence of things, it intervenes or freezes. From this statement, we can infer that Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's 'three elements' of the environment can be broadly categorized as the physical and social environments. The physical environment encompasses factors such as climate and soil, while the social environment encompasses national policies, religious beliefs, and political structures (Dong Yunhan, 2005). Prolonged, unchanging environmental conditions exert a substantial and enduring pressure on human beings, who are inherently social creatures, thereby shaping and interfering with the environment. In Maupassant's *Une vie*, the character of Aunt Jeanne undergoes continuous molding and solidification under the influence of her surroundings.

4.1 The Influence of Political Situations on a 'Servant-Oriented' Personality:

Following the impact of the bourgeois revolution, France's political landscape underwent profound changes. The power of the extravagant, licentious, and selfish feudal aristocracy dwindled significantly but persisted in corrupting society, particularly the lower echelons. *Une vie* vividly portrays the images of these aristocratic classes, highlighting their corrupt and inept characteristics. For example, the Blisserville couple obsessively engaged in bureaucratic formalities, dedicating their days to correspondence with French aristocratic relatives. They meticulously discussed trivial matters as if they were matters of national importance. Within the upper class, even those with limited acquaintance considered weddings, funerals, and the births of renowned families as significant as major societal events.

These outwardly glamorous but inwardly hollow and unsightly groups oppressed not only the lower classes but also reinforced hierarchical divisions within the upper class. The higher a noble's status, the more they fixated on etiquette, concealing their thoughts, emotions, and speech behind a condescending façade (Maupassant, 2022). When Julien and Joanna visited the province's most distinguished aristocrats, Guthrie and his wife, their grand estate and a royal letter showcasing their status preceded their haughty and arrogant demeanor. Due to her lofty status, legitimate title, and considerable wealth, the Marquise considered herself the queen of Norman nobility. Her arrogance and hypocrisy in interactions with others were evident. When Joanna contradicted her internal

standards, she immediately turned cold towards Joanna, labeling her a 'traitor.' The Marquise even went so far as to politely suggest that anyone who believed in God, regardless of their financial situation, was considered 'sacred' in her eyes.

Money and status held paramount importance within the aristocratic class. Aunt Jeanne, devoid of both, became susceptible to bullying and manipulation. In *Une vie*, Aunt Jeanne features prominently in nearly every significant event, consistently lurking timidly in the shadows, unnoticed by all. Although she presented gifts, they were accepted as a matter of course. Her lowly status left her inferior even to her junior relatives. During Joanna's childbirth, while everyone anxiously waited indoors, Aunt Jeanne and the cook, Lydia Fan, remained concealed in the corridor, observing. Her low status resulted in her receiving indifference and orders she was expected to follow. When the baroness grew drowsy and wished to summon Julien and Joanna, the baron insisted they continue enjoying the splendid scenery. Aunt Jeanne was instructed to stay and await their return, with no consideration for her exhaustion or discomfort. Over time, she became accustomed to such treatment, culminating in the development of a 'servant-oriented' personality characterized by unquestioning obedience.

4.2 The Influence of Religious Belief on an 'Avoidance' Personality:

The 19th century marked a significant period of instability for France's political structure, with a series of political events exacerbating the oppression of the lower classes by the aristocracy. In *Une vie*, Father Torbjörg acknowledges, When the church and the manor cooperate, the inhabitants of thatched cottages will obey and fear us (Maupassant, 2022). The collusion between aristocratic and religious forces left those at the bottom subjected to ceaseless oppression and servitude, particularly disadvantaged women in a patriarchal society. Women, devoid of societal influence, faced greater constraints and oppression than men, a fate shared even by aristocratic women.

Religion offered women an outlet for their distress, providing solace through worship, prayer, and admonition. While offering momentary respite, religion imposed more formidable and authoritative shackles. The story of Adam and Eve illustrates how religion bolstered male dominance, with Adam declaring Eve 'bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.' Religion posits that women are inherently subservient to men and destined to serve as tools for male rule and the perpetuation of male dominance. The Catholic Church of the time viewed 'all women as akin to Pandora, symbolizing God's curse. They were believed to bring evil and disaster to humanity, being vile, incomplete, and flawed individuals. To atone for their 'evil nature,' they must willingly submit to male control and dominance (Yang Tingfang, 2003).'

Aunt Jeanne was a devoutly religious individual. When Joanna ceased attending church due to the priest's cruel behavior, Aunt Jeanne experienced unease and emotional pain, as, in her eyes, forsaking church was inconceivable. When the baron refused to allow Paul to receive religious education, Aunt Jeanne panicked, viewing it as a breach of religious duty. Her fear of religious authority stemmed from her extensive societal pressure. Unlike the baron, who enjoyed greater societal tolerance as a man, Aunt Jeanne was more apprehensive due to the amplified societal pressures she faced. She had never married and held no power or social standing. She had been largely ignored since her childhood, with only the kind God providing solace for her pent-up sadness and dissatisfaction. The more disadvantaged women like her were, the more they trusted and feared religious authority. However, religion, steeped in patriarchal values, did not teach these marginalized women to challenge societal injustices. Instead, it encouraged them to accept their subordinate roles and to learn forgiveness for men's infidelity. Aunt Jeanne epitomized the powerless, lower-class women of her time who, under the combined oppression of religion and society, gradually developed an 'avoidance' personality.

4.3 The Influence of Family Environment on a 'Sensitive' Personality:

The family unit is a fundamental component of society, serving as the primary environment for human survival, development, education, and character formation (Cao Lixin, 2016). Aunt Jeanne's low self-esteem, sensitivity, and timidity evolved through her family's indifference. As a child, she failed to meet her family's standards for beauty and obedience, resulting in a lack of favor. Over time, she transitioned from seeking attention and affection

in the shadows to isolating herself within her bedroom. The prolonged confinement only deepened her self-doubt, intensifying her low self-esteem and introverted personality.

Parental attitudes and methods significantly shape a child's personality. In the context of the time, marriage held immense importance for women. However, Aunt Jeanne, having reached marriageable age, remained overlooked. She faced ridicule and escalating coldness. Unable to bear the psychological pressure, she decided to take her own life by the river. Her parents, upon rescuing her, displayed a lack of concern for her mental well-being and did not investigate the cause of her suicide attempt. Instead, they responded with anger and abuse, labeling her as 'insane.' This authoritarian and negatively extreme approach to education left an indelible mark on Jeanne's character, further exacerbating her pre-existing sensitivity and fragility.

Aunt Jeanne exhibited extreme fragility and submissiveness, yearning for care and affection from others. She would prepare numerous gifts and meticulously sew handkerchiefs for Joanna, seeking acknowledgment and praise. The slightest kindness would move her to the point of fainting, while even a trace of malice could plunge this vulnerable woman into an abyss of despair.

Therefore, growing up in an apathetic and extreme family environment, it is unsurprising that Aunt Jeanne developed a 'sensitive' personality.

5. Tragic personality born under the influence of time

Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's 'three elements' include the 'era' element, which posits that throughout history, mainstream concepts have consistently held sway, dominating the speech and thoughts of the masses. As these concepts gradually recede from historical prominence, new ideas emerge but remain inevitably influenced by prior societal concepts. Every line in *Une vie* underscores the prevalence of patriarchy and the suffering and vulnerability of women ensnared by the entrenched customs of feudal tradition. These enduring beliefs have deeply penetrated people's minds, serving as the breeding ground for the emergence of new misconceptions that corrode individual independent consciousness and exert a profoundly negative impact on society. Aunt Jeanne stands as a tragic figure, profoundly controlled by antiquated feudal notions.

5.1 The Formation of a 'Submissive' Personality under Patriarchy:

In late primitive society, productivity increased, and men's labor began to surpass that of women. With accumulated practical experience from hunting and labor, men developed enhanced social skills and robust physical prowess. They asserted their superior conditions, subsequently displacing women from their central family and societal roles. Women, in contrast, placed family at the forefront of their priorities, bearing the responsibility of maintaining family ties and supporting husbands and children. Over time, the gender gap widened, with men increasingly wielding power within the household and playing pivotal societal roles. Consequently, the belief in male superiority became deeply ingrained in society.

Compared to men of the time, women faced a plethora of constraints. In 19th century France, during the capitalist era, a culture of selfishness, hypocrisy, and extravagance permeated society. Behaviors such as Julien's multiple infidelities or the baron's dalliances with women remained largely uncensured. The priest rationalized these actions by citing human weakness and offered forgiveness, thus turning a blind eye to the mistreatment of women. Meanwhile, society expected women to serve men, rendering out-of-wedlock pregnancies trivial. Women were often reduced to the status of victims in the eyes of society. As a representative of lower-class women, the maid Rosalie fell under the spell of Julien's charisma. When faced with Julien's advances and possession, she opted for compromise and submission. Even after giving birth, Julien not only abandoned the child but also forcibly evicted Rosalie from Poplar Heights, vehemently opposing the 20,000 francs from the baron's family that had been intended for her.

Despite superficial respect for women, men retained absolute power. The baron, for example, projected the desire for Joanna to lead a content life publicly but secretly arranged her marriage and tightly controlled her existence,

confining her to a stifling cage. Julien, a symbol of patriarchy, exploited women at his whim, viewing Joanna as an object of desire during bouts of lust. His intolerance for any challenge to his authority underscored his belief in absolute power within the family. Upon discovering the priest and the baroness conspiring behind his back regarding Rosalie's future, Julien's sense of dominance within the family was shaken, leading to astonishment, unease, anger, and a need to reassert his authority. Similarly, Paul often requested money from Joanna through letters after running away from home. Despite Joanna's precarious financial situation, she did her best to provide for him, but Paul's reckless spending left her no choice but to sell her cherished Baiyang Villa to settle his debts.

The oppressive nature of patriarchy contributed to the gradual decline of women's social status, resulting in Aunt Jeanne's submissive and timid demeanor. When Joannas and Julien strolled through the woods, the baron instructed Jeanne to wait for their return. It was only after the baron and his wife had left the living room together that Jeanne dared to stand and declare, 'Set aside your sewing and enjoy the enchanting night scenery' (Maupassant, 2022). In many pivotal moments in Joanna's life, Jeanne silently stood by her side, receiving only neglect and contempt. Paul's arrival offered Jeanne newfound hope as she yearned for his care and warmth. She meticulously tracked Paul's growth each month, even laboring in the fields as a vegetable gardener to garner his affection. This deep longing drove her to despise a puppy for diverting Paul's attention away from her. Timid and lacking assertiveness by nature, Jeanne never dared to express her inner grievances or dissatisfaction. For Jeanne, religion remained a pious and inviolable refuge, but she only dared to quietly instruct Paul to respect and love God, emphasizing the need for discretion. When the baron discussed Paul's education, Jeanne, out of fear, retreated to a dark corner, avoiding any dissent. Her silence stemmed from both fear of contradicting the baron's remarks and the prospect of losing her only source of sustenance and support, plunging her back into solitude.

The emergence of patriarchal society inflicted pain and suffering upon women. It was within this environment that Aunt Jeanne endured torment, ultimately molding her 'submissive' personality.

5.2 The Formation of an 'Unsociable' Personality under the Influence of Customary Beliefs

Customs represent established behaviors and concepts within society, with violations of these norms subjecting individuals to condemnation and criticism. For instance, premarital pregnancy was considered an improper behavior scorned by society at large. When the extramarital affair between Julien and the maid came to light, the priest admonished Rosalie, cautioning that a merciful God would not easily forgive her, and without timely correction, she would face eternal damnation. Such 'unseemly' behavior, in the public eye, occurred with alarming regularity, even extending to children.

However, the social oppression of women transcended these boundaries. In French patriarchal society, marriage was an obligatory responsibility for women to gain respect and recognition. Women were viewed as existing primarily to care for their families and bear children. This societal framework reduced women to appendages of men, and dependency upon men became their only means of sustaining daily life. For instance, despite Julien's charming demeanor before marriage, he adopted deceitful and self-serving traits afterward, revealing the baron's lack of understanding of him. From the baron's perspective, he aimed to mold Joanna into an exemplary woman, yet in his ignorance, he offered his beloved daughter to Julien as a sacrifice. The message was clear: women were destined for marriage. Once wed, they could rely on their husband's family for property and status, but without marriage, they risked losing their livelihood. This concept also found embodiment in Joanna. Joanna, upon inadvertently discovering her husband's improper relationship with the countess, incurred Father Torbike's wrath for her submissive compliance. Yet, her cowardice and ineptitude prevented her from leaving Julien, fearing the loss of her financial support. Before marriage, her love for nature had fueled her curiosity about the world, but after marriage, she acquiesced to her father and husband's dictates, consistently negating herself and resigning herself to a life of misery and solitude.

For disadvantaged groups of women, such as Aunt Jeanne, remaining unmarried resulted in societal scorn. Jeanne, having never married and lost the possibility of marriage, violated societal norms, subjecting her to ridicule and contempt. Her once-lovely name was tarnished. Growing up without notice, Jeanne continuously lowered her own position, harboring great fear of all things. Despite her timid and submissive nature, she held hopes and happiness

tied to marriage. Witnessing the unmarried couple, Joanna and Julien, stroll together, she genuinely wished them a beautiful love story while lamenting her own unfortunate fate. The stark contrast between her reality and the visual spectacle before her exacerbated her loss and despair, prompting her to withdraw, becoming more cautious in an attempt to fill the void of loneliness in her heart.

These deep-seated, decadent, and obsolete societal customs function like thorny barriers, relentlessly constraining women trapped within this stifling cage. The disadvantaged group of women, as exemplified by Aunt Jeanne, evolved into an 'unsociable' personality under the yoke of this brutal oppression.

6. Conclusion

Based on a close reading of the text and an application of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements" theory, Aunt Jeanne's character is analyzed to understand the factors shaping her persona. The origins and development of her character are intrinsically linked to Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's "three elements", which seemingly resemble the properties of sodium. Racially, Aunt Jeanne is portrayed as inherently timid and cowardly, yet deeply sentimental. Environmentally, her character has been influenced by a distorted political system that has hindered her ability to assert herself, misleading religious doctrines that promote escapism, and a detached familial setting that instilled in her an inferiority complex and heightened sensitivity. Historically, the advent of the patriarchal society subjected women to immense pain, and the entrenched, degenerating social norms further exacerbated their suffering. This research on Aunt Jeanne's character and her tragic narrative offers insights into the distressing destiny of women of that era, offering readers a fresh lens to view *Une vie*. It also poses pertinent reflections on the current state of women in society.

Data availability: The authors have included all the relevant data and the source of freely available data in the manuscript.

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