Background. The backdrop for "Two Friends" is the Franco-Prussian War, also called the Franco-German War. In this ten-month conflict in 1870-71, a coalition of German states known as Prussia fought to defeat France and capture its emperor, Napoleon III. In one military strategy, the German army blockaded Paris, starving the city's inhabitants into compliance. As Maupassant's story begins, Paris is on the verge of surrender.

Paris was blockaded, starved, in its death agony. Sparrows were becoming scarcer and scarcer on the rooftops and the sewers being depopulated. One ate whatever one could get.

As he was strolling sadly along the outer boulevard one bright January morning, his hand in his trousers pockets and his stomach empty, M. Morisset, watchmaker by trade but local millitant for the time being, stopped short before a fellow millitanian whom he recognized as a friend. It was M. Sauvage, a riverside acquaintance.

Every Sunday, before the war, Morisset left at dawn, a bamboo pole in his hand, a tin box on his back. He would take the Argenuil railroad, get off at Colombes, and walk to Marante Island. As soon as he arrived at this ideal spot he would start to fish; he fished until nightfall.

Every Sunday he would meet a stout, jovial little man, M. Sauvage, a haberdasher in Rue Noire-Dame-de-Lorette, another ardent fisherman. Often they spent half a day side by side, line in hand and feet dangling above the current. Inevitably they had struck up a friendship.

Some days they did not speak. Sometimes they did; but they understood one another admirably without saying anything because they had similar tastes and responded to their surroundings in exactly the same way.

On a spring morning, toward ten o'clock, when the young sun was drawing up from the tranquil stream wisps of haze which floated off in the direction of the current and was pouring down its veritable warmth on the backs of the two fanatic anglers, Morisset would sometimes say to his neighbor, "Nice, isn't it?" and M. Sauvage would answer, "There's nothing like it." And that was enough for them to understand and appreciate each other.

On an autumn afternoon, when the sky, reddened by the setting sun, cast reflections of its scarlet clouds on the water, inside the whole river crimson, lighted up the horizon, made the two friends look as redly as fire, and gilded the trees which were already brown and beginning to tremble with a wintry shiver, M. Sauvage would look at Morisset with a smile and say, "Fine sight!" And Morisset, awed, would answer, "It's better than the city. Isn't it?" without taking his eyes from his float.

As soon as they recognized one another they shook hands energetically, touched at meeting under such changed circumstances. M. Sauvage, with a sigh, grumbled, "What goings-on!" Morisset groaned dismally. "And what weather! This is the first fine day of the year."

The sky was, in fact, blue and brilliant.

1. angler (ang' lér): n. person who fishes.

Critical Viewing. What might Sauvage and Morisset find enticing about the setting of this landscape? [speculate]
They started to walk side by side, absent-minded and sad. Morisset went on, "And fishing! Ah! Nothing but a pleasant memory."

"When will we get back to it?" asked M. Sauvage.

They went into a little cafe and had an absinthie, then resumed their stroll along the sidewalks. Morisset stopped suddenly. "How about another, eh?" M. Sauvage agreed. "If you want." And they entered another wine shop.

On leaving they felt giddy, muddled, as one does after drinking on an empty stomach. It was mild. A caressing breeze touched their faces.

The warm air completed what the absinthie had begun. M. Sauvage stopped. "Suppose we went?"

"Where?"

"Fishing, of course."

"But where?"

"Why, on our island. The French outposts are near Colombes. I know Colonel Dumontin; they'll let us pass without any trouble."

Morisset trembled with eagerness: "Done! I'm with you." And they went off to get their tackle.

An hour later they were walking side by side on the highway. They reached the villa which the Colonel occupied. He smiled at their request and gave his consent to their whim. They started off again, armed with a pass.

Soon they passed the outposts, went through the abandoned village of Colombes, and reached the edge of the little vineyards which slope toward the Seine. It was about eleven.

Opposite, the village of Argenteuil seemed dead. The heights of Orgemont and Sannois dominated the whole countryside. The broad plain which stretches as far as Nanterre was empty, absolutely empty, with its bare cherry trees and its colorless fields.

Pointing up to the heights, M. Sauvage murmured, "The Prussians are up there!" And a feeling of uneasiness paralyzed the two friends as they faced this deserted region.

"The Prussians?" They had never seen any, but for months they had felt their presence—around Paris, running France, pillaging, massacring, starving the country, invisible and all-powerful. And a kind of superstitious terror was superimposed on the hatred which they felt for this unknown and victorious people.

Morisset stammered. "Say, suppose we meet some of them?"

His Parisian jauntiness coming to the surface in spite of everything, M. Sauvage answered, "We'll offer them some fish."

But they hesitated to venture into the country, frightened by the silence all about them.

Finally M. Sauvage pulled himself together: "Come on! On our way! But let's go carefully." And they climbed over into a vineyard, bent double, crawling, taking advantage of the vines to conceal themselves, watching, listening.

A stretch of bare ground had to be crossed to reach the edge of the river. They began to run, and when they reached the bank they plunged down among the dry reeds.

Morisset glued his ear to the ground and listened for sounds of anyone walking in the vicinity. He heard nothing. They were indeed alone, all alone.

Reassured, they started to fish.

Opposite their Marante Island, deserted, hid them from the other bank. The little building which had housed a restaurant was shut up and looked as if it had been abandoned for years.

M. Sauvage caught the first gudgeon; Morisset got the second, and from then on they pulled in their lines every minute or two with a silvery little fish squirming on the end, a truly miraculous draught.

Skillfully they slipped the fish into a sack made of fine net which they had hung in the water at their feet. And happiness pervaded their whole being, the happiness which seizes upon you when you regain a cherished pleasure of which you have long been deprived.

The good sun was pouring down its warmth on their backs. They heard nothing more; they no longer thought about anything at all; they forgot about the rest of the world—they were fishing!

But suddenly a dull sound which seemed to come from under ground made the earth tremble. The cannon were beginning.

Morisset turned and saw, over the bank to the left, the great silhouette of Mount Valerien wearing a white plume on its brow, powerscone which it had just spit out.

And almost at once a second puff of smoke rolled from the summit, and a few seconds after the roar still another explosion was heard.

Then more followed, and time after time the mountain belched forth death-dealing breath, breathed out milky-white vapor which rose slowly in the calm sky and formed a cloud above the summit.

M. Sauvage shrugged his shoulders. "There they go again," he said. As he sat anxiously watching his float bob up and down, Morisset was suddenly seized by the wrath which a peace-loving man will feel toward madmen who fight, and grumbled, "Folks sure are stupid to kill one another like that."

M. Sauvage answered, "They're worse than animals."

And Morisset, who had just pulled in a bleak, went on, "And to think that it will always be like this as long as there are governments."

M. Sauvage stopped him: "The Republic wouldn't have declared war—"
In this paragraph, the mountain is personified and blamed for the destruction. Why? What is the author’s message?

And they started a leisurely discussion, unraveling great political problems with the same reasonableness of easy-going, limited individuals, and found themselves in agreement on the point that men would never be free. And Mount Valerien thundered unceasingly, demolishing French homes with its cannon, crushing out lives, putting an end to the dreams which many had dreamed, the joys which many had been waiting for, the happiness which many had hoped for, planting in women’s hearts, in maidens’ hearts, in mothers’ hearts, over there, in other hands, sufferings which would never end.

"There they go," opined M. Sauvage.

"You’d better say That’s death for you," laughed Morisset.

But they shuddered in terror when they realized that someone had just come up behind them, and looking around they saw four men standing almost at their elbows, four tall men, armed and bearded, dressed like ‘liberté’ servants, with flat caps on their heads, pointing rifles at them.

The two fish lines dropped from their hands and floated off down stream.

In a few seconds they were seized, trussed up, carried off, thrown into a rowboat and taken over to the island.

And behind the building which they had thought deserted they saw a score of German soldiers.

A kind of hairy giant who was seated astride a chair smoking a porcelain pipe asked them in excellent French: "Well, gentlemen, have you had good fishing?"

Then a soldier put down at the officer’s feet the sack full of fish which he had carefully brought along. The Prussian smiled: "Ah! I see that it didn’t go badly. But we have to talk about another little matter. Listen to me and don’t get excited."

"As far as I am concerned, you are two spies sent to keep an eye on me. I catch you and I shoot you. You were pretending to fish in order to conceal your business. You have fallen into my hands, so much the worse for you. War is like that.

7. rivered [riv’erd] adj. unformed.

But—since you came out past the outposts you have, of course, the password to return. Tell me that password and I will pardon you."

The two friends, side by side, pale, kept silent. A slight nervous trembling shook their hands.

The officer went on: "No one will ever know. You will go back placidly. The secret will disappear with you. If you refuse, it is immediate death. Choose."

They stood motionless, mouthed silent.

The Prussian quietly went on, stretching out his hand toward the stream: "Remember that within five minutes you will be at the bottom of that river. Within five minutes! You have relatives, of course?"

Mount Valerien kept thuddering.

The two fishermen stood silent. The German gave orders in his own language. Then he moved his chair so as not to be near the prisoners and twelve men took their places, twenty paces distant, rifles grounded.

The officer went on: "I give you one minute, not two seconds more."

Then he rose suddenly, approached the two Frenchmen, took Morisset by the arm, dragged him aside, whispered to him: "Quick, the password? Your friend won’t know, I’ll pretend to relent."

Morisset answered not a word.

The Prussian drew M. Sauvage aside and put the same question.

M. Sauvage did not answer.

They stood side by side again.

And the officer began to give commands. The soldiers raised their rifles.

Then Morisset’s glance happened to fall on the sack full of gudgeons which was lying on the grass a few steps away.

A ray of sunshine made the little heap of still squirming fish gleam.

And he almost weakened. In spite of his efforts his eyes filled with tears.

He staggered, "Farewell, Monsieur Sauvage."

M. Sauvage answered, "Farewell, Monsieur Morisset."

They shook hands, trembling from head to foot with a shudder which they could not control.

The officer shouted, "Fire!"

The twelve shots rang out together.

M. Sauvage fell straight forward, like a log, Morisset, who was taller, staggered, half turned, and fell crosswise on top of his comrade, face up, as the blood spurted from his torn shirt.

The German gave more orders.

His men scattered, then returned with rope and stones which they tied to the dead men’s feet. Then they carried them to the bank.

Mount Valerien continued to roar, its summit hidden now in a mountainous cloud of smoke.

Two soldiers took Morisset by the head and the feet, two others took M. Sauvage. They swung the bodies for a moment then let go.

Based on their characterization so far, did you expect Morisset and Sauvage to give up? Why or why not?

Two Friends

Vocabulary Builder

placid [plad’ik] adv. calmly

Reading Strategy

Evaluating Characters’ Decisions. What will be the consequences for Paris if the two men reveal the password?

Reading Check

What does the Prussian officer demand of Sauvage and Morisset?

V Basic Analysis

Dynamic and Static
Characters In what way does the characters’ conversation show that the men have changed?

Critical Viewing

Which details of these Prussian officers’ uniforms might intimidate citizens like the two friends? [Analyze]
They described an arc and plunged into the river feet first, for the
weights made them seem to be standing upright.
There was a splash, the water trembled, then grew calm, while tiny
wavelets spread to both shores.
A little blood remained on the surface.
The officer, still calm, said in a low voice: "Now the fish will have their
turn."
And he went back to the house.
And all at once he caught sight of the sack of gudgeons in the grass.
He picked it up, looked at it, smiled, shouted, "Wilhelm!"
A soldier in a white apron ran out. And the Prussian threw him the
catch of the two and said: "Try these little animals right away while
they are still alive. They will be delicious."
Then he lighted his pipe again.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond**: What did you find especially shocking or disturbing about
this story? Explain.

2. (a) **Recall**: List three characteristics of the friendship between
M. Morisset and M. Sauvage. (b) **Infer**: What motivates the two men
to go fishing?

3. (a) **Recall**: Why are the villages of Colombes and Argenteuil and the
surrounding areas deserted? (b) **Connect**: How does theemptiness of
the landscape foreshadow, or hint at, the events that occur later in
the story?

4. (a) **Recall**: What do the two men say about war in relation to
republics and monarchies? (b) **Draw Conclusions**: What do their
comments reveal about their own attitudes? (c) **Connect**: In what
way do these attitudes affect the outcome of the story?

5. (a) **Recall**: What is the man's attitude or reaction to the death of
his dog? (b) **Support**: How does this
description support the two men's earlier impressions of the
Prussian forces?

6. (a) **Recall**: What strategies does the Prussian officer use to force
the password from the two friends? (b) **Judge**: Would you describe
the Prussian officer as an ethical soldier? Explain.

7. (a) **Relate**: If you were in the place of one of the two friends in
Maupassant's story, would you have gone fishing? Why or why not?
(b) **Take a Position**: Should the two friends be blamed for their own
death? Why or why not?

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**Background**

From the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, Russian peasants were bound by law to work land they could rent
but not own. They grew food meant to feed others, cultivated crops that
others would sell, and worked to exhaustion to make a profit for the land-
owner. Peasants could even be bought and sold with the land they worked.
This story takes place after the laws were changed to allow ordinary people
to purchase land. To those who had never owned it, land represented the
ability to control one's destiny. Tolstoy uses land, an image close to the
heart of every Russian, to explore the age-old question, "How much is
enough?"

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I

An elder sister came to visit her younger sister in the country. The
elder was married to a tradesman in town, the younger to a peasant in
the village. As the sisters sat over their tea talking, the elder began
to boast of the advantages of town life: saying how comfortably they lived
there, how well they dressed, what fine clothes her children wore, what
good things they ate and drank, and how she went to the theater,
promenades, and entertainments.
The younger sister was piqued, and in turn disparaged the life of a
tradesman, and stood up for that of a peasant.

"I would not change my way of life for yours," said she. "We may live
roughly, but at least we are free from anxiety. You live in better style
than we do, but though you often earn more than you need, you are
very likely to lose all you have. You know the proverb, "Loss and gain
are brothers twins." It often happens that people who are wealthy one
day are begging their bread the next. Our way is safer. Though a
peasant's life is not a fat one, it is a long one. We shall never grow rich,
but we shall always have enough to eat."

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1. *Pronomadhe* (prohm' ah n'prondh) n. belle or formal dance.
2. *belle* (bahl) n. ball.