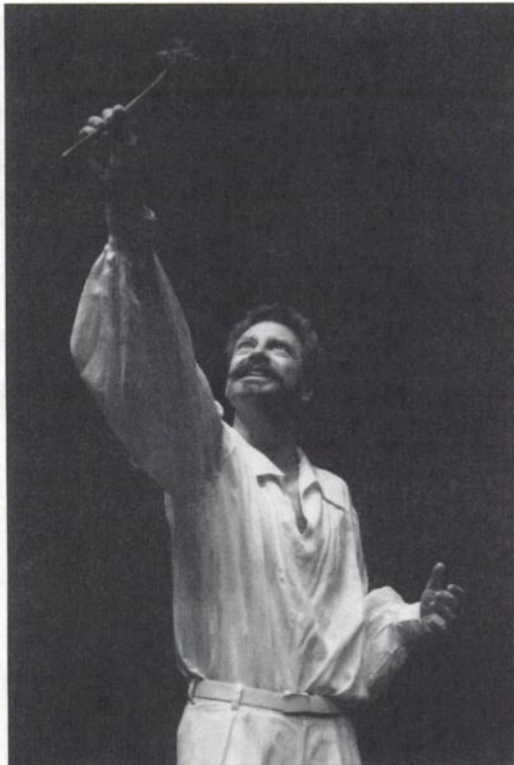


A writer's madness exposed

Roisin Kemp explores the fact and fiction behind Guy de Maupassant's *Le Horla*

Dramatised by Compagnie du Loup, Grenoble, and performed on 3 February 1994 at the French Institute, this Maupassant short story describes the evolution of a psychosis in an intelligent and creative man. The narrator documents events as they proceed over five months, culminating in the desperate attempt to rid himself of his imaginary persecutor by burning down his house. The shifting atmosphere is evocatively portrayed, from the opening scene depicting the contentment of a man in his idyllic home by the Seine watching ships sail from Rouen to Le Havre. Gradually his idyll is soured by the intrusion of inexplicable feelings of dread and foreboding. In the ensuing days and weeks the protagonist falls prey to mounting anxiety and physical malaise,



Jean-Marc Galéra of Compagnie du Loup in '*Le Horla*'.

insomnia, fever, and night terrors. He begins to notice some disturbing events – his water carafe emptied overnight, pages of his book turning of their own accord, a flower in his garden breaking off at the stem as if plucked by an invisible hand. These experiences give way to an ineffable sense of an occult presence come to haunt him. He starts to doubt his sanity though he feels completely lucid. His attempts to reason with himself are particularly moving.

"I must be a rational man who hallucinates", he says. Or else he is afflicted "by one of these maladies that the physiologists of today are trying to categorise: this ailment must have created a deep lesion in my brain, in the order and logic of my ideas. Similar phenomena take place in dreams where we encounter the most improbable fantasies without being at all perturbed, because the monitoring apparatus is asleep, while the imaginative faculty is active and working . . . therefore should it be surprising if my ability to test the reality of certain hallucinations is overwhelmed at the moment . . .?"

However, this inner debate ends when he begins to experience feelings of being controlled, and identifies his invisible persecutor – *le Horla* (an invented word, possibly a condensation of *hors-la*, suggesting something supernatural or extra-terrestrial). He reads of an epidemic of possession in South America and concludes that his persecutor arrived on a Brazilian ship which he watched pass some weeks previously.

"Someone is ordering all my acts, movements and thoughts. I am nothing but an enslaved and terrified spectator of all the things I do." He describes being unable to move, almost paralysed in his chair, then "forced" to go out to the garden to pick strawberries. The passivity experiences are portrayed as being acutely agonising to the tormented protagonist, and he is filled with murderous hate for his invisible enemy.

We know that at least some of the phenomena described in the story are autobiographical, e.g. looking into a mirror and not seeing his own reflection, and indeed it is tempting to view the story as a documentation of the psychopathology of the author, who suffered the neuropsychiatric complications of GPI and was committed to an asylum when he attempted suicide not long after completing *Le Horla*. It is a convincing study of the stages of a psychosis and a powerful depiction of the inner turmoil of a man struggling to keep a grip on reality.

Maupassant was aware of his diagnosis and at the time he wrote *Le Horla* had been the victim of neuralgias, ocular troubles, and chronic insomnia which he described graphically in letters to his friends. He was well aware that when he wrote about madness his readers might see his work as a confessional account of his own symptoms and illness. He had visited Charcot in the Salpêtrière and was himself fascinated with ideas in vogue at the time, including the work of Mesmer, which inspire the dinner party episode in the story when a psychiatrist demonstrates hypnosis to sceptical guests. He was also particularly interested in abulia, believing human will to be a very fragile mechanism as our sensibilities are continually being affected by a myriad of influences of which we are scarcely aware.

It is ironic that so much is known about the illness of this man who deplored the posthumous revelations of his mentor Flaubert's epilepsy, believing that details of the writer's life should remain hidden, and that the work alone should

survive. Nonetheless, it seems that he saw in his own affliction a sign that he was marked by destiny for great things, a spur rather than an obstacle to his endeavours.

Literary commentators have protested against psychiatric dissection of the story, preferring to interpret it symbolically as a visitation by the ghost of Literature, or perhaps of Flaubert himself. Paradoxically, some saw the writing of the story as a kind of therapeutic exorcism for Maupassant. Written in the first person, there can be little doubt about the author's personal involvement in the work. In *Le Horla*, what is essentially a monologue chronicling a psychotic breakdown is sustained by the vigour and immediacy of the language. It is a compelling dramatic piece by a man evidently still at the height of his creative powers.

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Not so smart drugs

Dr Kwame McKenzie of the Institute of Psychiatry contrasts the publicity and the evidence behind drugs that are claimed to make us brighter.

Research into smart drugs is a field of pharmacology which never fails to capture the public imagination. And, because the idea of being able to take a pill to circumvent hours of studying is so appealing, much has been made of successes in this field.

There have been claims of memory enhancing properties for over a hundred substances – acetyl-L-carnitine, choline, inositol, lecithin, phenylalanine, hydergine, piracetam, aniracetam, oxiracetam, pramiracetam, pyroglutamate, vasopressin and bromocriptine to name but a few. However, a recent unpublished review by Dr Stephen Rose, from the Open University, concluded that there was no justification for the claim that any of the smart drugs can boost the memory of unimpaired humans.

There is evidence, though, of some effects in people with cognitive impairments of various kinds. A 1993 article from the Consumer's Association based on Dr Rose's report claimed that studies have shown that vasopressin improves the memory and alertness of people

suffering from diabetes insipidus, that there are unrefuted claims that piracetam can help dyslexic children learn to read and that piracetam, other 'acetam' drugs, co-dergocrine mesylate, hydergine and pyroglutamate produce a improvement in memory and alertness in dementia.

Other researchers have been less rigorous but have been effective in producing a popular image of smart drugs which does not correspond with research evidence. The best known publicists are probably Dr Ward Dean, a Florida based geriatrician, and John Morgenthaler, a journalist and entrepreneur whose book is credited by some with starting a smart drug consumer boom. Unashamedly titled *Smart Drugs and Nutrients: how to improve your memory and increase your intelligence using the latest discoveries in neuroscience*, it includes chapters on 'over the counter cognition enhancers', 'overseas drugs by mail' and 'taking exams', and six pages of uncritical testimonials and case histories in case readers are in any doubt of the efficacy of the compounds covered.

Not long after the book's publication interest in smart drugs crossed the Atlantic. Initially a small-scale underground black market supplied students but the trade became big business, with