

Parisian Social Hierarchy and Female Sexuality Through the Lens of Impressionist Art and Naturalist Literature, 1870-1890

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Following the start of the Second Empire under Napoleon III in 19th century France, Paris was subject to major economic, demographic, and societal changes (Clayson 1). In particular, the emergence of a new “consumer culture,” increasingly enamoured with the production and acquisition of material wealth, resulted in an exponential rise in mass production and commodification (Iskin 2). Interestingly, as the commodification of material goods increased, so did the commodification of women; this phenomenon would eventually capture the avid interest of members of French literary and artistic circles (Clayson 1).

Although women have long been subjects of interest in literature and art across different cultures, the frequency with which the modern Parisian woman, and in particular the Parisian prostitute, was penned and painted throughout the 19th century, is indicative of the profound cultural shift that was underway (Clayson 1). In the artistic realm, the subject of sexual exchange was portrayed with great earnest by modern artists (i.e. the Impressionists) who carried an insatiable desire to visually portray the realities of unromanticized modern life that had both fascinated and formed the discourse for the theories and writings of intellectuals such as Charles Baudelaire and Émile Zola (Clayson 1-8). As keen observers of urban life and modernity, artists such as Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas used studies in behaviour, physiognomy, and general physiology to represent the truth of the commodification of sex. These artistic studies draw parallels to similar literary studies on modern Parisian society and female sexuality. Of note is Émile Zola’s novel, *The Masterpiece* (1860), wherein the protagonist’s quest for artistic recognition places him repeatedly in contact with members of the opposite sex, ranging from bourgeois housewife to prostitute. Analysis of the various female archetypes apparent in work such as these, particularly those exemplifying the beliefs that governed women’s sexuality, are invaluable sources, shedding light on the life of the modern Parisian woman.

Women (particularly those within middle and upper class bourgeois circles) were subject to a vast array of expectations and constraints born out of a domineering patriarchal society. These expectations were based predominantly on a model of submissiveness and pleasantries, which required passive behaviour and obedience (Iskin 50). Iskin, who discusses the “strictly regulated” rules of looking, or the female gaze, in 19th century French society, presents an example of this oppressive regulatory system (50). Females of all ages were encouraged to avoid eye contact with other individuals, particularly with their male counterparts (Iskin 50). This expected form of behaviour was engrained in lessons on French etiquette, which “prescribed that when walking down the street, ‘women must avoid looking people in the eye especially men who pass near them. This would be a mark of incivility and impudence’” (Iskin 50).

When discussing societal restrictions placed on women, it becomes clear that invisibility was the plight of the Parisian woman, although the measure of invisibility varied based on social hierarchy. Her place was in the home, or in the strictly regulated company of family, her betrothed, or female companions of similar rank. Zola provides an example of the invisible woman in the form of Pierre Sandoz’s wife, Henriette, who “ran her household according to good middle class standards” (183). Despite her success at being a model of morality and domesticity, she is utterly invisible to the reader with the exception of moments pertaining to domestic duty, which she performs flawlessly.

It should be noted that the moral behaviour observed in the bourgeoisie was not restricted to this class alone. Females within the working class also retained characteristically bourgeois behaviour, although they were normally viewed as morally deviant creatures (Clayson 13). Zola’s depiction of Christine Hallegrain, a working class girl employed outside of Paris, challenges those preconceived notions of the working class woman, as her relationship with Claude is fraught with chaste and reluctant behaviour, which Claude goes so far to describe as “prudish” (13, 82-83, 152). It isn’t until Christine reconciles herself with her love for Claude that she, despite her initial “prudery,” comes to represent a certain “looseness” that establishes her as a figure of both sexual desire and sexual suppression - the reality of female sexuality in Paris at the time (Zola 107, 132, 136, 139, 141).

It is this notion of female sexuality that becomes the driving force of distinction between female members of the classes. While the demand for female submissiveness and domesticity asexualized bourgeois women to some extent, dampening both their sexual appeal and sexual impulse, female members of the working class perceived as being of loose moral standing were highly sexualized and often associated with prostitution (Clayson 13).

This practice of distinguishing between women on the basis of their sexuality was born out of a period of “relentless sexualization” of women throughout the 19th century (Clayson 9). For despite the sexual restrictions placed on women, all members of the female population were subjected to intense male scrutiny and were heavily objectified (Clayson 9). The intense sexualization of women is evident in a number of artistic works from the period; however, it is Edgar Degas who provides some of the most prominent portrayals of this subject in his ballet series. *L'Etoile* (Figure 1), in addition to other works such as *Dancers at the Old Opera* (Figure 2), *The Curtain* (Figure 3), and *Dancer in Her Dressing Room* (Figure 4) present themes on voyeurism, male fantasy, sexual favour, and female oppression during this time by toying with the notion of spectator. In each rendering, the partial, cropped, or shadowed view of a male figure watching the girls gives one the sense of a predator-prey interaction. The faceless man, the every man, captivated by the movements of the bare legs before him, lies in wait for the young girl(s) to make their exit and fulfill his fantasy. *Dancer in her Dressing Room* provides a particularly striking view on this form of male-female interaction, as it appears to show the fulfillment of male fantasy as the young dancer undresses before a male visitor (Figure 4).

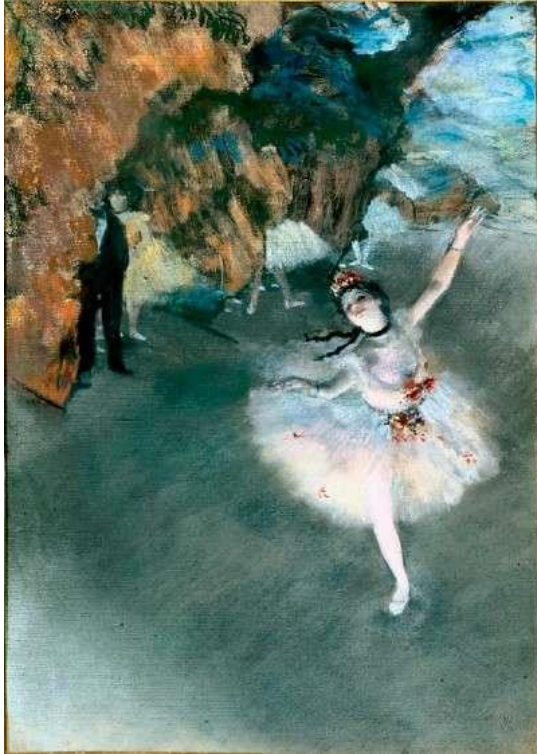


Figure 1. Degas, *L'Etoile*, 1878



Figure 2. Degas, *Dancers at the Old Opera House*, 1877

The apparent sexual willingness of the young dancer in Degas' *Dancer in Dressing Room* hints on themes of prostitution and male sexual urges. Previously in this analysis, it was suggested that women of the working class were highly sexualized and associated with prostitution as a result of their lower class standing and supposed loose morals. Zola's Madame Jabouille (Mathilde) is the embodiment of this idea. Living in extreme poverty with an ailing husband, she is known for being "quite at home with the men...dropp[ing] into [a man's] lap with all the abandon of a prostitute" (Zola 62-63). Although in some instances this view could be considered wrong or misplaced, unfortunately the association between working class female and prostitute was often times a correct assumption.

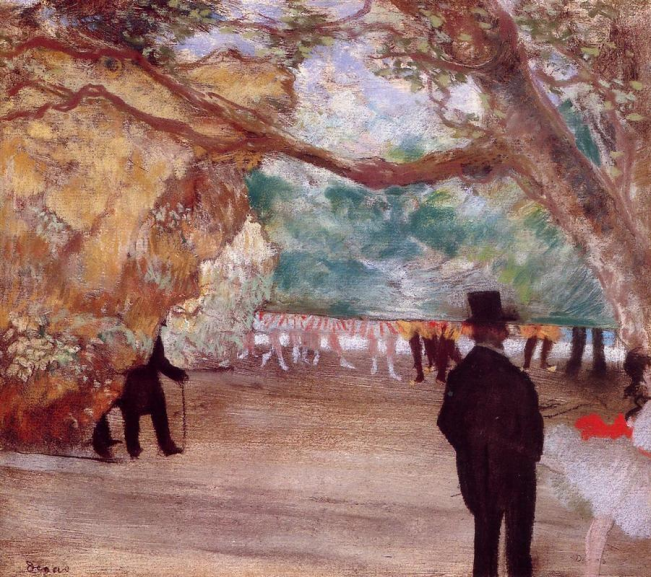


Figure 3. Degas, *The Curtain*, 1880



Figure 4. Degas, *Dancer in Her Dressing Room*, 1880

Drastic changes to the existing infrastructure and economic status during the formation of the modern industrial city under Napoleon III produced a widespread demographic upheaval as migrants were pulled into the city from neighbouring rural areas (Clayson 1). As the population continued to expand at a rapid pace, the amount and quality of job opportunities declined at a similar rate (Clayson 1). Although labour demands were on the rise for all individuals within the city, of particularly limited opportunity were female migrants. Female members of the working class, whose lower status, and associated lack of money, required they find some means of employment, were often unemployed or employed only by low-paying professions (Clayson 1). As a result, a large majority of the female population was required to live on less than the minimum survival wage (Iskin 68). With the increasing competitiveness of the job market, lower demand for female employees, and low-paying existing jobs, these women were driven to seek alternative means of financial support (Iskin 68). The rise of the prostitute among working class

women in 19th century Parisian society was to become a hallmark of the century (Clayson 1).

The reality of working class female and prostitution is made evident in Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (Figure 5). A young woman, known in Parisian society as a vendor of consolation stands at the counter, her gaze distant and her body language unyielding. This working front that she presents contrasts strongly with her cleverly skewed reflection in the mirror behind. Where at first glance she appears absorbed within herself, she now presents a willing and sexually suggestive stance in conversation with an interested male patron. The reflection indicates the reality of the working class woman's life: selling sex in order to rise out of destitution (Pollock 75).



Figure 5. Manet, *Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, 1882

The sexual appetite of the prostitute, combined with a lack of attention to the requirements of etiquette (e.g. boldness of gaze) is what distinguishes them from those women of respectable nature (Iskin 50). The prostitute was considered a morally unstable individual, whose seemingly insatiable sexual appetite (in addition to high frequency of sexual encounter, variability of partner, and financial transaction) resulted from a form of

“sexual deviance” (Clayson 7, 10). The deviant sexual behaviour and lack of etiquette characteristic of the prostitute are evident in Manet’s *Olympia* (Figure 6). The directness of her gaze and the realistic, almost garish, rendering of her form portray her as a figure of female defiance and sexual liberation (Flescher 31). As she lounges on her bed, she fixes her gaze on the viewer - a gaze that is filled with “casual indifference...recognition...sadness, [and] courageous defiance” (Friedrich 2). Flescher describes her as being “not a passive plaything” but a symbol of “power, sexuality, and defiance” (33). Similar attributes are evident in Manet’s *Nana* (Figure 7), whose sexuality is heightened by her sensual, corset clad body and direct, playful gaze (Friedrich 159).



Figure 6. Manet, *Olympia*, 1863



Figure 7. Manet, *Nana*, 1877

The *Olympia* and *Nana* of Impressionist art are also evident in Zola's Irma Becot. Although never explicitly stated, her bold, sexually suggestive mannerisms and reputation as a woman about town make her the literary reincarnation of Manet's artistic figures (Zola 68-69, 98-99, 113, 169-173). Different from the vendors of consolation or other working class women mentioned earlier, Irma, Olympia, and Nana are considered to be part of a distinct class of prostitution, known as the "grand cocotte" or "glittering courtesan" (Clayson 2). Known for emulating high fashion and the mannerisms of high society, the courtesan was a formidable enemy to Parisian society (Clayson 2). As

sexual deviancy was viewed as a form of contagion, capable of spreading to respectable members of female population and heightening male sexual obsession and desire, the hidden prostitute became as much a cause for public anxiety as the overt, street operating prostitute (Clayson 13, 15).

Both courtesans and clandestine prostitutes became a driving force behind the Regulation movement in France during the 19th century (Clayson 10). The movement aimed to regulate sexually deviant behaviour by controlling a tolerable level of prostitutes as the profession continued to expand in size (Clayson 10, 15). Under law, women were labeled as being either *soumise* (under police control, kept) or *insoumise* (out of police control, clandestine) (Clayson 10). The lives of both the *soumise* and the *insoumise* are effectively represented in Degas' brothel monotypes and his portrayal of *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*. As is discussed by Broude, Degas' brothel monotypes present "direct images of female degradation...an often harrowing vision of the State-regulated system of prostitution" (Broude 652). The interior scenes show glimpses of crowded brothels, filled

with naked or partially clad prostitutes waiting for work, their faces marred by expressions of extreme boredom or sadness (Figure 8-11).



Figure 8. Degas, *In the Salon*, 1878-79



Figure 9. Degas, *Three Seated Prostitutes*, 1878-79



Figure 10. Degas, *The Madame's Birthday Party*, 1878-79



Figure 11. Degas, *Waiting*, 1878-79

Women on a Café Terrace, Evening exists in stark contrast to the monotypes, as a small handful of fully clad, albeit garishly clad, women are shown at work in the open air (Figure 12). Although there was the potential for clandestine work to be equally as harrowing as regulated work, there was a sense of liberation and freedom of choice that was not available to the “kept” woman.



Figure 12. Degas, *Women on a Café Terrace, Evening*, 1877

Through the duration of the 19th century, the prostitute and her association with commodification in the new consumer culture captured the attention of both author and artist. From Manet's depictions of the ambiguous vendor of consolation to the overt portrayals of sexual exchange in Degas' brothel monotypes, a profile on the lives and roles of these women is readily obtained. Zola's candid narrative on the life of the working class woman and the prostitute provides further insight into class differences and their associated societal perceptions on female sexuality.

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