

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight by Émile Zola

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Style

Point of View

Zola adopts a third-person omniscient point of view to tell this story. The narrator is reliable and unobtrusive. When appropriate, the narrator provides insight into the characters' thoughts and emotions. This is especially important for showing the internal struggle that Mouret feels about marrying beneath his class. It is also important in highlighting some of the other themes, such as Hutin's motives in the silk department, or to show Madame Desforges' jealousy. At other times, the characters present their ideas directly in dialog. For example, Mouret and Baron Hartman have conversations about the new business climate that are persuasively presented in dialog in a way that exposition could not have achieved.

The point of view sometimes focuses on Denise and her struggle to survive. Sometimes the point of view focuses on Mouret, providing detailed information on his character, his business ideas, and his own struggle. Some chapters focus on Baudu or Bourras to show the neighborhood perspective. When the focus shifts to Madame Marty, the reader gains more insight on the middle-class perspective. Scenes that focus on Madame Desforges show the society perspective. Using an omniscient point of view that includes a focus on many different characters presents a comprehensive look at the effect that Au Bonheur des Dames has on the neighborhood.

Setting

The Ladies' Delight is set in Paris in the 1870s. It is a Paris that is becoming more modern, which requires clearing out buildings (like Bourras' house) and practices (the paternal businesses) that have been in place for 200 years. The expanding Au Bonheur des Dames and the new road Rue du Dix-Décembre represent the new, modern Paris that emerges from the ashes of the old neighborhood.

Denise's struggle takes place in several settings, including the ladies' wear department at Au Bonheur des Dames and her tiny room when she first arrives, as well as her better rooms as life improves. Baudu's dining room and shop and Bourras' house are dark, dying places that contrast with the shining brightness of the department store and space created with the new road. Even Robineau's shop is small and dim, representing the death of the old ways taking place there.

Zola spends considerable effort describing the entire department store, from the receiving area and dispatch, to the mail room and counting house, and the departments themselves. Mouret takes a tour of the store early in the novel, and another tour near the end of the novel. This contrast shows how things have improved as Au Bonheur des Dames grows and Denise's influence and ideas are implemented. This improvement is especially apparent in the dining room scenes.



Other scenes are at Madame Desforges house, a wealthy aristocratic home. Her house is the setting for philosophical talks between Mouret and Vallagnosc, and business talks between Mouret and Baron Hartman. Another scene outside the neighborhood is when Denise accompanies Pauline and Baugé to Joinville. This country setting allows Denise to see Hutin outside of his slick, salesman setting. Similarly, a walk in the gardens allows Mouret and Denise to have a friendly conversation away from work and the pressures and influences of the other store employees.

Language and Meaning

The Ladies' Delight uses language appropriate for the times. It uses language and sentence structure one would expect for a novel published in the 1880s. The conventional language and rich vocabulary seem more formal by today's standards, but are fitting for a story set in the late nineteenth century. Even though the language and dialogue are sophisticated, the novel is easy to follow. Some French phrases evoke the context of the novel, set in Paris. The names of the stores are italicized and remain in the original French. Names of streets and characters also retain the original French, but are not italicized. Some of these names may seem unfamiliar to a reader without a background in French, but a familiarity with French is not required to enjoy the story. Many words use alternative spellings.

The meaning and imagery of the novel are very straightforward. The main image describes the department store as a machine. Zola also presents the department store as a church or temple. Some of the openings to the chapters include extensive description to elaborate on these images. These images provide a commentary on the effect of the large department store on Paris at the time. These comparisons of the department store to an unfeeling machine designed for supporting consumption, or as a tabernacle to a new kind of worship still apply today. At times, the straightforward nature of the language glazes over the passage of time in the plot. It is sometimes difficult to tell how much time has passed since the last chapter or scene.

Structure

The novel is divided into fourteen approximately equal chapters averaging thirty pages each. Some chapters focus on Denise's struggle for survival. Some chapters focus on the neighborhood's struggle (and failure) for survival. Chapters set at Madame Desforges' house focus on society and provide a place for Mouret to describe his business philosophy. Likewise, Denise defends the large store business philosophy in the chapters set in Baudu's or at Robineau's dining table. Some chapters show the conditions in the department store, both before and after the improvements that Denise influences. The novel presents a different focus with each chapter, returning to each focus to show how things have changed over time.