

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide

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

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Characters

Octave Mouret

Mouret becomes the sole owner of Au Bonheur des Dames through luck after his wife dies. He feels gratitude to her for the good fortune she has brought him, but he is determined to consume the women of Paris, both as customers in his store, and as his mistresses. He is brutal in business, but understands the new commercial climate very well. Mouret predicts what will happen to the old trades, and feels no guilt about crushing the neighborhood businesses in his need to have his store take over the whole block as a beacon for the new Paris. Mouret believes he is a man of his time. He feels compelled to take action as the times call for progress and revolution. At first, he stakes his happiness on the success of his business. He is nervous that no one will come to his big sale, on which he has risked his future by renewing all his capital as additional goods. Mouret is also full of excitement for life, and a very hands-on manager.

Mouret likes being the benevolent prince in the store, letting Bourdoncle handle the reprimands and firings. He avoids conflict, such as when he talks with Robineau in his office, but then fires him with a letter later. He cares what his staff thinks of him. He also cares what Madame Desforges thinks of him.

Mouret is frantic when Denise does not immediately become his mistress. He is used to his power and money having an effect on people. He is used to getting what he wants. He knows, deep inside, that if she gives in and becomes his mistress, he will develop a contempt for her. Yet, he does not understand that more money does not change the issue. Denise is the first attachment that is not merely a pleasant pastime or a calculated move. As Denise continues to resist Mouret, he pays for his sins of using women with his suffering. He even feels guilty about using Madame Desforges, since he has her connection with Baron Hartman to thank for his success.

When Mouret realizes that he must marry Denise, he has to overcome his long-held perceptions of class. These ideas must die like the small businesses in the old neighborhood. He resists giving in to this change. When he finally decides to marry her, he considers it a huge folly, as if he is throwing everything away. At that point, he does not care about anything else anymore. However, by shedding those old perceptions and beliefs, he is able to progress to a better future.

Denise

When Denise arrives in Paris, she is a young woman of 20 who has been in charge of her younger brothers since their parents' deaths a year ago. She has very long, luxurious hair, and looks impoverished in her old, tattered clothes. She has two years of experience as a salesgirl in a small shop in Valgones. She is enticed by all the activity and the amazing displays at the Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise is kind and gentle and



does not want to hurt her uncle's feelings, but she is also practical and must find a job and a place to live. She is humiliated by the store's immensity and the hostility of the other sales people, but she accepts her place in the social status as well as the requirements of her job.

While in her store uniform of silk, she holds back her sensitive nature, but back in her woolen dress in her tiny room, she lets the tears flow. This aspect is further explained as a tendency to have an initial rush of emotion followed by the strength to do what has to be done. She is practical and determined, putting up with solitude and imprisonment. Her ideas are based on common sense and decency. Her actions are guided by her gentle kindness as well as her good manners and polite nature.

She is both attracted to and afraid of Mouret at first. Denise cannot explain her feelings for Mouret. She knows that she loves him, and that gives her strength to resist being with him, because she instinctively knows that being his mistress will not make her happy. However, she is also simply afraid, being a young girl with no experience in love. Denise understands what Mouret is doing with his machine. He is opening the way to the new Paris, creating a revolution in business. This allows her to forgive his affect on her family and friends in the neighborhood.

Denise hates the big store, but defends it to her family and friends. She does not know what force takes her back there. Even in sight of her family being destroyed by the store, she does not feel that going back is wrong. By not making any demands, Denise affects positive changes in the store's environment for the workers through her common sense approach. She does not have any ideas of improving her status. She only lives by her values, which impel her to act in way that will bring long-term happiness.

Pépé

Pépé is Denise's brother who is five years old when they arrive in Paris. He is a calm and compliant child who never causes her any trouble, except that Denise must make money to meet his needs. He is more beautiful than his sister, with his fair hair and childish features. He spends much of the novel boarding with Madame Gras.

Jean

Jean is Denise's brother who is sixteen years old when they arrive in Paris. He is the reason they have come to Paris. He has shown talent in ivory carving and has gotten an apprenticeship. This apprenticeship provides him room and board, and does not cost Denise anything. However, Jean has also gotten into trouble with women already. He is constantly chasing after a new woman and thoughtlessly spends Denise's money on his women. As Denise's circumstances worsen, he stops asking for so much money. Eventually he grows up enough to stop needing it and earns his own income. At the end of the novel, he has gotten married, and Denise is helping his with a few last purchases before his honeymoon.



Baudu

Denise's uncle left Valgonnes as a young man to become a junior assistant at the Vieil Elbeuf, which was a prosperous shop when he inherited it. He married the shop owner's daughter. Baudu is a proud, fat man stuck on the old ways of doing business, which is to make as much profit as possible out of every sale, though they may be few. He is reluctant to let Colomban, his assistant, marry his daughter, Geneviève, until the shop regains the prosperous condition in which he inherited it. He feels resentment at the Au Bonheur des Dames. He is angry and desperate, but he has not changed the displays or anything about his shop in all the time he has owned it.

When his continued struggle against the department store uses up all his money, he decides to sell his retirement home. This is hard for him, partly because he feels a grudge that a simple salesperson makes more at the department store than he does as a shop owner. This is another perspective on the class issue.

Madame (Élisabeth) Baudu

Madame Baudu is an anemic-looking woman, old before her time. She has lived her whole life in the Au Vieil Elbeuf shop her father inherited from the original owner. Through bad luck and poor choices, Madame Baudu and her husband have lost almost all of their big family, and nearly everything else. She is so intertwined with the store that losing their business, as well as their daughter, kills her.

Geneviève

Geneviève is the only daughter of Baudu and his wife. She has inherited her mother's sickly looks, but has an enormous amount of black hair that seems to have extracted all the passion out of her body. Depressed about Colomban's wandering eye, Geneviève seems to be causing her own illness, anorexia. She asks if she is fat, worried that Colomban does not want her for her looks. She tries to hide her thinness from her mother. Geneviève wastes away in the shop waiting for Colomban, a man she does not really even want, because everyone has always assumed they would marry. Baudu puts off the wedding several times. Geneviève completely wastes away and dies, providing the final blow to her parents and their failing shop.

Colomban

Colomban is the industrious assistant at Au Vieil Elbeuf who has helped Baudu for ten years. He expects to take over the shop and marry the owner's daughter, as is done in a patriarchal shop. Since he has never had to win Geneviève, he is not that attracted to her. He has also inherited his father's weakness for womanizing, although in Colomban it is not as pronounced. He mainly spends his time looking at the salesgirls in the ladies' wear department at the Au Bonheur des Dames. Eventually, he does have a brief affair



with Clara, and takes to stalking her, which finally brings about Geneviève's destruction. This affair is actually his calculated attempt to get out of a marriage to a dying girl in a dying store.

Bourras

Bourras is the next-door neighbor to the Au Bonheur des Dames. He has a long beard and an ancient look, looking like a prophet. He is attached to his building and way of life, though the building is in shambles and he is only a tenant. He intends to prevent Mouret from obtaining his building during the years he still has on his lease of the building. His tenants are of questionable repute.

Bourras is a craftsman and an artist, creating beautiful umbrella handles, but he cannot compete with his neighbor's economies of scale. He has a brusque manner with a harsh voice, but he helps Denise out of charity because he cannot let anyone die of poverty in his house. He is the type that the neighborhood parents use to threaten their misbehaving children.

Bourras will not give in at any price. He even uses all his money to fight the attempt to get tunnels under his building. Bourras compares his struggle against Mouret to Denise's struggle to maintain her pure reputation. He cannot be bought. However, his struggle is useless. He loses his house anyway, and has nothing left when he leaves the demolished building from which he has been evicted.

Vinçard

Vinçard is the silk shop owner that Baudu hopes can provide Denise with a job. Vinçard, however, is trying to sell his shop. He says it is because of his rheumatism, but in reality, he sees the writing on the wall with Au Bonheur des Dames. He knows he is not up to the competition and does not want to be ruined along with his neighbors. After selling his business to Robineau, he starts a restaurant in Vincennes, happy to have gotten out of the silk business just in time.

Madame (Henriette) Desforges

Henriette Desforges is a widow and Mouret's lover, though she is sensible about the liason and never allows any scandal. She recognizes that Mouret is just using her to get to Baron Hartmann, but she loves him so much that she plans to find a way to keep him. Madame Desforges represents the bourgeoisie in the commentary on class in the novel. She is the high society character who brings together the characters outside the store. She is also the sophisticated shopper who only buys a few things at Au Bonheur des Dames, and would never admit to wearing their clothes.

Madame Desforges grows desperate to keep Mouret. Her jealousy brings her to the store, where she is trapped into buying things just like the other customers. She treats



Denise like a servant to avenge her jealousy, but Denise is patient and submits to her job. She treats Denise terribly at her house, making her wait, and then ordering her like a slave, insisting on her superiority. She wants to catch Mouret in this affair, but because Denise's actions are reputable, there is nothing to catch. Madame Desforges reveals her affair with Mouret by being too familiar with him in front of Denise, which angers Mouret and goes against her usual discretion. When Madame Desforges realizes she has pushed things too far, she is devastated.

Madame (Caroline) Hédoin

Madame Hédoin is the daughter of a small shop owner of Au Bonheur des Dames before Mouret takes over. A widow and part owner of the shop, she marries Mouret and reluctantly allows him to make changes and expand. She falls at the building site and dies, eventually leaving Mouret the sole owner of the shop. The luck of the big department store is rumored to be the result of Madame Hédoin's blood in the foundation.

Baron Hartmann

Baron Hartmann is the director of the Crédit Immobilier. The liaison he developed with Madame Desforges while her husband was still alive continues in the present time of the novel as more of a paternal influence. Mouret needs Baron on his side to realize his plans of expanding Au Bonheur des Dames to take up an entire block. Baron is not sure Mouret's plans for expansion will work. As he watches the ladies at Madame Desforges' house, however, he becomes convinced. Baron invests in Au Bonheur des Dames, and the investment is quite profitable for him, convincing him to pressure the Crédit Immobilier to allow Mouret to expand into the whole block.

Madame Desforges presents another investment opportunity when Bouthemont wants to open a competing store. Baron Hartman agrees to have money invested in competing stores.

Monsieur (Paul) de Vallagnosc

Paul de Vallagnosc is an old school friend of Mouret's who has taken a different path since school. After obtaining his baccalaureate, he eventually takes a junior post at the Ministry of the Interior, not making much money. He is bored and disgusted with life. He is planning to marry Blanche de Boves, but only because he admires her father. Vallagnosc thinks life is pointless and stupid, and provides a contrast to Mouret's excitement and passion for life. Vallagnosc provides more commentary on the class issue when his mother-in-law is caught for stealing.



Robineau

Robineau is the assistant buyer in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. Robineau is resentful toward Au Bonheur des Dames because instead of him getting the promotion to buyer he was promised, an outsider gets the job. He feels sorry for Denise and helps her get the job at Au Bonheur des Dames. Later he helps her get extra work when he sees what poverty she lives in working at the large store. Vinçard is trying to convince him to purchase his silk shop. The money belongs to his wife. He thinks that because he is young, and Gaujean is giving him generous credit terms, he can succeed against Au Bonheur des Dames. He accepts the new ways of doing things, but does not have the power to affect real change. He tries to kill himself, feeling bad about losing his wife's money, and facing bankruptcy. The accident only breaks his leg.

Madame Aurélie

Madame Aurélie is the buyer in the ladies' wear department at Au Bonheur des Dames. She is a very successful sales woman, and this gives her tremendous power in the store, which she uses to get jobs for her family and friends. She represents the extreme of the new way of doing things, by refusing to be called by her last name. Her family is only loosely connected to one another, providing commentary on the broken families created by the department store. Madame Aurélie's friendship with Mouret also gives her power, which influences the fact way Denise is treated.

Bourdoncle

Bourdoncle started at Au Bonheur des Dames as a small neighborhood shop at the same time as Mouret. He has always deferred to Mouret, sensing the power that Mouret has, but ready to take over when the time comes. Bourdoncle is serious-minded and prudent. He has invested his money in the store, eventually becoming one of the principal investors. This makes him concerned with the profits and bottom line of the business in all his dealings. He pretends to hate women, but he really just wants to exploit them as customers. Concerned with the success of the business, Bourdoncle fears Denise's effect on Mouret. He thinks she is the revenge that all women will take on Mouret for their exploitation through the store. He eventually accepts Denise, because he sees the opportunity to attack and replace Mouret.

Bouthemont

Bouthemont is the buyer in the silk department. Hutin recommended him from outside the store to prevent Robineau from getting promoted. Bouthemont is not a good salesman, but he is an excellent buyer, so he gets a free hand in running the department. He is motivated by a commission on an increased turnover of goods, rather than actual sales. Bouthemont is affected by the turbulence in his department that



results from the competition. This leads to Robineau's dismissal, and eventually to his own dismissal.

Bouthemont becomes a confidant to both Mouret and Madame Desforges as a sort of buffer in the dying relationship. He uses the friendship with Madame Desforges the same way Mouret did, as a way to get financial backing from Baron Hartman. When Bouthemont finally loses his job as buyer, he is quick to develop a competing store. He uses the same tactics as Mouret, to an even greater extent to gain business. The fact that his business is lost to a big fire only serves as greater publicity for when the store eventually reopens.

Lhomme

Lhomme is Madame Aurélie's husband. She recommends him for his job as cash desk manager, where he makes a fixed salary of less than his wife. He has lost an arm under an omnibus, but still manages to play the horn with a system of clamps. He loves music and spends all his free time playing or listening to music instead of spending time with his family. When Denise gets Mouret to make changes in the store, the orchestra becomes his pet project.

Albert Lhomme

Albert is Madame Aurélie's son, whom she recommends for a cash desk job. He is not good at his job, making mistakes and spending too much attention to women customers and sales clerks. He spends his money gambling, drinking, and on loose women. He is friends with Mignot, and eventually loses his job sending his women to Mignot's department to steal.

Hutin

Hutin is the top salesman in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. He wants Robineau's job, so he recommends Bouthemont as buyer so that Robineau will not get promoted. Hutin hopes to drive Robineau out. Hutin is the epitome of the competition that Mouret promotes in the store. Hutin does any and everything possible to get his percentage and commission. Hutin's irritation and impatience at spending time on customers who are not buying anything undermines his sole obsession on his commission. Hutin puts on his salesman charm for Denise, seeming like the only friend she has, although nothing could be further from his mind. When he finds out later that Denise has a crush on him, he is secretly flattered, but openly boasts that they had already slept together.

Hutin acts like he despises young girls in favor of his boasted affairs with his rich customers, although the reality is that he picks up girls in bars and music halls. He spends his money as fast as he can get it, never thinking about the future. When he finally gets the promotion, he becomes unbearable in the department, instead of being



the friendly manager he promised to be. As buyer, his department undermines him even more, since that is part of the machine that Mouret has created. Hutin talks with Madame Desforges about getting a job at Bouthemont's new store because he predicts that the department will drive him out, too.

When Mouret blows up at Hutin near the end of the novel, Hutin knows that the rumors about him and Denise are the real reason for the explosion.

Favier

Favier is a salesman in the silk department of Au Bonheur des Dames who comes from family of weavers. He is friendly with Hutin, but covets his friend's job as top salesman, and later as under-buyer, then buyer.

Clara Prunaire

Clara is the tall red-head in the ladies' wear department. She has several gentlemen friends and many more occasional lovers. She only works in the shop as a cover, as she lives in fear from her father who beats her. Clara's affair with Mouret and her decision to steal Colomban away from his fiancée are important points in the plot.

Clara makes a statement about class when talking about Mademoiselle de Fontenailles and Joseph. However, Clara is envious of the love Mademoiselle de Fontenailles has for Joseph. Clara, in contrast, is only using her men and extracting her revenge on them for the way her father treated her.

Marguerite Vadon

Marguerite is the ladies' wear department sales girl who came to Paris to hush up her illegitimate child. She supports Denise in the possible relationship between Denise and Mouret when she comments on how much trouble one can get into by not being sensible. Marguerite is the sales clerk most jealous and bitter about rubbing shoulders with society and not being a part of it.

Madame Frédéric

Madame Frédéric is the under-buyer in the ladies' wear department. She leads a secretive life, providing speculative gossip in her department. She leaves the job suddenly, providing a position to allow Mouret to promote Denise.



Mademoiselle (Pauline) Cugnot

Pauline Cugnot is a salesgirl in the lingerie department who is kind to Denise at the beginning, remembering what a hard time she herself had the first few months on the job. Her parents are millers in Chartres. When Denise resists Mouret, Pauline thinks she is throwing away a fortune. The irony is that Denise ensures a true fortune by not allowing herself to be bought for a temporary fling. Pauline allows herself to be degraded by taking lovers who help her make ends meet. She leads a happy enough life. She marries her lover and they have a child. Denise intervenes to keep Pauline at the store even after having a baby.

Baugé

Baugé is the tall boy in the linen department who is Pauline's boyfriend. His family runs a grocery store, but they shut Baugé out, thinking that he is too dumb to help with the business. Pauline sometimes makes fun of him, but seems happy with him. After he and Pauline marry, Baugé treats Denise (now buyer) as if she is upper class.

Henri Deloche

Deloche applies for a job at Au Bonheur des Dames at the same time as Denise. As the lowest salesman in the lace department, he only earns commissions, and he sleeps in the store at night. He falls in love with Denise from afar, and after revealing his love, which is not returned, he becomes friends with Denise. Deloche defends Denise against the gossip and rumors about her and Mouret, but his defense ends up doing more harm than good.

Madame Cabin

Madame Cabin is in charge of the women employees' rooms at Au Bonheur des Dames. The girls learn that they can bribe her to look the other way while they stay out all night with their lovers.

Joseph

Joseph is the porter who works at Albert's cash desk delivering purchases to the dispatch department. He is Albert's foster-brother. He represents the working class, and instigates a scandal among some of the characters with his relationship with Mademoiselle de Fontenailles.

Campion

Campion is the head of the dispatch dept and a retired sergeant.



Mademoiselle de Fontenailles

Mademoiselle de Fontenailles is a 28 year old aristocratic woman from a ruined family. She does not have enough education to get a respectable job, so Madame Desforges asks Mouret to find her a job at the store. Mademoiselle de Fontenailles' relationship with the porter Joseph causes a fuss among some of the characters. She represents the aristocracy in the class theme of the novel.

Gaujean

Gaujean is a silk manufacturer who thinks the large stores will put the French silk industry out of business. He encourages Robineau to buy Vinçard's shop and extends him very generous credit terms, in hopes he will succeed and force Au Bonheur des Dames to have better terms for the manufacturers.

Madame Sauveur

Madame Sauveur is a fashionable, expensive dressmaker. Mouret reveals that she buys materials at Au Bonheur des Dames.

Madame Bourdelais

Madame Bourdelais is a practical housewife with three children: Madeleine, Edmond, and Luci n. She is married to a deputy head at the department at the Ministry of Finance. She is skilled at finding bargains. Madame Bourdelais is the shopper least likely to fall to temptation, but when the store gets to her through her children, even she succumbs.

Madame Guibal

Madame Guibal is the shopper who is primarily a window shopper, until Mouret invents the advertising gimmick of returns. Madame Guibal abuses the system, buying curtains for a party and then returning them. Her husband enjoys free living, which allows her to have her own lovers. She has a harsh ego and is sensible about her own affairs, making sure to maintain her respectability. Monsieur de Boves pursues her at Madame Desforges teas, but Madame Guibal hangs on to the affair. She keeps it secret by meeting in public places like the reading room of Au Bonheur des Dames until Monsieur de Boves becomes ill and his mistress and wife decide to come to open terms with each other.



Madame de Boves

Madame de Boves is the beautiful Countess who is married to the general inspector of the Stud. Her husband, who has many affairs (including Madame Guibal) does not give her pocket money. She looks through the store at every sale, consumed with passion for the fine things she cannot buy. This temptation turns into a neurosis when she starts to steal. She takes advantage of Deloche, the worst salesman, by having him show her lots of expensive lace. When her husband becomes ill and she and his mistress have to get along, she starts getting more money from her husband. However, she steals with money in her pocket, because it has become a type of thrill-seeking for her. The management helps her stay respectable when they catch her stealing, and she retains her haughty attitude.

Blanche de Boves

Blanch is the 21 year-old daughter of Madame de Boves who is set to marry Paul Vallagnosc. She has many of her mother's traits, from her physical build to her haughty society attitude.

Madame Marty

Madame Marty is an ageless but ugly woman who feels compelled to wear the prettiest and latest fashions. She is the middle-class woman who finds a better life through marked prices, but she has no control over herself while shopping. She gets carried away, despite the fact that her husband can barely make enough money in extra work to keep them afloat. She has good intentions, but cannot resist the temptations in the store. Succumbing to this temptation makes Madame Marty ill. Her spending addiction makes things difficult at her husband's job, because of the type of extra work he is doing. She feels bad about this, but she still cannot stop herself.

Valentine Marty

Valentine is Madame Marty's 14 year old daughter. She is used to dressing as nicely as her mother. She provokes her mother to get nicer things than she can really afford.

Madame Boutarel

Madame Boutarel is a provincial shopper who comes to Paris to shop occasionally. All the sales people know her, with a reputation for saving her pennies for months and spending it all when she comes to Paris. She might have been Denise's first sale, but Madame Aurélie does not want a regular customer to be served by the beginner.



Liénard

Liénard is the son of a rich draper in the provinces and a salesman in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. Since he lives off his father, he is not a very motivated salesman. He hates to work, but living in fear of being called home, he does just enough work to keep from being fired.

Mignot

Mignot is a successful salesman in the glove department at Au Bonheur des Dames. He constantly complains about the food in the dining room. He becomes good friends with Albert, drinking, gambling, and wasting money on women with his friend. Albert sends him women to get bargains. When the women start stealing, Mignot ends up helping them, because he is already too compromised to tell the management. Mouret fires him in his power rage when he finds out.

Jouve

Jouve is the former army captain who has become inspector at the store. He is a handsome older man who invites the sales girls to his house, expecting sexual favors from them. In return, he helps them keep their jobs. When Denise violently refuses him, he immediately searches for a reason to fire her, and since Jean comes into the store that day needing money, Jouve does not have to look far. Jouve knows which kind of customer is more likely to steal, and follows pregnant women especially.