

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide

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

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Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces Denise and her brothers, who are her responsibility now, even though she is only 20 years old, and their dire circumstances. It also introduces her Uncle Baudu and all of the characters connected to his store, the Vieil Elbeuf, including his wife Madame Élisabeth Baudu, Geneviève, and Colomban, who are all affected by the battle going on between the old and new ways of doing business. Chapter 1 also introduces the neighborhood shops that are threatened by the successful Au Bonheur des Dames.

Denise is drawn to Au Bonheur des Dames for many reasons. One of them is a "yearning for life and light" (Chapter 1, p. 17). Denise recognizes that her uncle's shop, as well as his way of doing business, is dying a slow, painful death. In contrast, Au Bonheur des Dames is thriving, even expanding. It is full of life. This sets up a repeated image contrast of the dark dying shops to the light thriving department store.

Baudu and his neighbor Bourras both plan to make a stand against their competitor until their own deaths. Their rants provide an indirect introduction to Mouret and his history of going from a womanizing adventurer new to Paris to sole owner of this incredibly successful shop and its new way of doing business.



Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the imagery of the machinery of the big department store with amazing detail and clarity with Mouret's first big tour of the main departments, including receiving, mail order, the counting house, the silk department, and the ladies' wear department. A mistake with a delivery introduces the Lhomme dynasty, with Madame Aurélie as the undisputed head. This chapter also presents the conflict in the silk department, where Hutin undermines Robineau because he wants the assistant-buyer's job. This competition exists throughout the store, but it is most brutal in the silk department. Finally, this chapter introduces the ladies' wear department, with its petty, hostile sales girls.

This chapter introduces the tension between Mouret and Bourdoncle, who started at the store at the same time, which serves to explain Mouret's business philosophy of selling at a discount but in large volume. It also provides a good presentation for Mouret's ideas for motivating the staff, such as paying the sales staff a commission and giving a bonus in the counting house for every mistake found. Bourdoncle, in contrast, claims to not understand the publicity approach that Mouret uses and is there to ensure the store still makes a profit. He also serves as executioner, while Mouret is the benefactor. Bourdoncle predicts that the women (including customers) that Mouret uses will have revenge. This foreshadows the effect Denise has on Mouret later in the novel.

Denise and Mouret encounter each other outside the store, in the silk department, and in the ladies' wear department. Denise senses something about Mouret, but thinks that he is the head of a department. Mouret is interested in her, although he does not think she is pretty at first. Madame Aurélie plans to give Denise the job, even though she is the sixth applicant for one position, and not necessarily very qualified for it, because she wants to gain favor with Mouret. Denise is humiliated by the terrifying attitudes from the other sales girls, but she gains courage at the thought of her and Pépé and their need for money. She is attracted to Hutin, because he is the only one who is nice to her, although he was just putting on his salesman charm. Mouret plays the benevolent prince, even with Denise when he offers advice and goodwill for her uncle.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 introduces the society characters who come to Madame Desforages' Saturday teas. Madame Desforages knows that Mouret is using her to get to Baron Hartman, but she is falling in love with him. She is planning to figure out a way to keep from losing him. When the ladies talk about the different goods and costs of items, they reveal what kind of shoppers they are. Madame Bourdelais is the thrifty shopper. Madame de Boves is filled with desire for things she cannot afford, because her husband does not give her spending money. Madame Marty is the compulsive shopper. Madame Guibal is too dignified to talk about bargains. Madame Desforages is also too high-class to buy clothes at Au Bonheur des Dames.

When Mouret catches up with his old school friend, it provides an in-depth look at Mouret's philosophy of life and his plans to exploit the women of Paris. He talks about the opportunity for his sales staff to make more money than more educated men, a statement about the blurring of class lines. Mouret's discussions with Baron Hartman introduce his business philosophies. Mouret knows that getting to the Baron through Madame Desforages is more effective than meeting him in his office. Mouret understands the power that women hold, but he plans to exploit that power to get rich. Baron Hartman predicts that some woman will revenge all the rest, foreshadowing the effect that Denise has on Mouret later in the novel.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter starts with the store awakening to its big sale day. The vans wait outside to deliver goods all over Paris, and Baudu watches with hateful eyes. The vans are a symbol of the new business ways with its name presence and advertising. Baudu recognizes the success the vans symbolize, but refuses to change his own business ways. This chapter also presents a dark side of these new ways in the store's employees. They make fun of people, undermine and back-stab each other, put on fake airs to impress each other and their customers, and think of nothing but their percentages to make enough money for their spending and bets. Like the employees, the customers have a dark side as well. While the department store provides a better quality of life to middle-class people, the modest customers are too easily carried away with desire for more (goods and status), even when they cannot afford it, as Madame Marty illustrates.

Denise knows the only way she can take care of her brothers is to somehow make it in this harsh environment, stealing customers away just like the other sales people. She feels very alone, afraid of reprimand even for making a friend, when the competition inside the department and with other departments is so fierce. The machine imagery extends to Denise's person as she no longer feels human, but just a machine herself as well as a cog in the overall machine.

Throughout the chapter, there is imagery referencing both a battleground, and storms or floods. Other important imagery involves the comparison of sexual abandonment to the ladies' fate once they start shopping inside the store.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The chapter opens and closes with Denise's encounters with Mouret. Neither of them understands the effect the other has on them. Mouret treats Denise like a child, but he senses that she will soon be a woman. He does not want to admit how much Denise affects him. Denise, too, senses her impending womanhood.

This chapter reveals the harsh conditions of working at a shop at the time. Many girls would have to leave the ladies' wear department, becoming ill from overwork. Denise's life is compared to an animal's in a zoo. Au Bonheur des Dames is her prison. However, Denise is patient, smiling, and gentle for two months. Her coworkers still reject her, tease her, conspire against her, secretly fear her, and only give her a few small sales, so that she is barely making enough money. Her heart is breaking with loneliness. Pauline tries to convince Denise that the only way she can survive is to get a man. Denise still says that way is not right for her. The thought of love in that environment is ridiculous with the competition and back-breaking work, though she has quite a crush on Hutin, feeling grateful at what are really only his salesman's smooth ways. When Deloche reveals his love, Denise cries because she knows that Pauline was right, and if it was Hutin instead of Deloche, she would cave in a heartbeat and let him take care of her.

This chapter provides several comments about the way a large department store affects the morals of its employees. The Lhomme family is one example. The three members of this family rarely see other, and are glad for it. Albert is drunk and entertaining three women when Denise and Pauline see him at the restaurant. The jokes about the Louvre having a midwife imply that every sales girl who works there ends up having a child.



Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter advances the plot and furthers the theme of the struggle for survival, showing how the big department store employers treat the employees. This aspect of the business leaves many sales clerks unemployed during the slow season. This chapter includes many more images of machinery.

Robineau's precarious position in the silk department provides more insight into the treatment of employees at Au Bonheur des Dames. He is an excellent salesman, so Mouret is reluctant to let him go. Bouthemont would rather keep things calm, and his salesmen (especially Hutin and Favier) are complaining about Robineau so much he recommends firing Robineau just to have peace in the department. The irony is that once this peace is gained, the salesmen target Bouthemont for their next attack. Mouret is swayed on Robineau by the rumors that he and the silk manufacturer have been talking about competing with Au Bonheur des Dames.

Pauline tells Denise that Jouve has expectations of the young ladies. This idea repulses Denise even more than the idea of getting a lover to keep her. Jouve makes advances on Denise when he finds her alone in the dining room. Because she reacts so violently, even ruining his tie, he is on the lookout for any misdemeanor to get her fired. He does not have to look hard, since Jean is there asking for money, and Denise tries to hide it instead of letting everyone see that it was just a respectable request from her brother. This chapter is also when Denise finally realizes that Hutin is no different from the rest of the sales staff. He teases her about Robineau, and she feels a sense of loss.

Bourdoncle reacts strongly when he learns of the sales-girls taking on extra work. He views this as just as bad as robbery, because the time and health of the sales staff does not belong to themselves, it belongs to Au Bonheur des Dames. Mouret views this practice with as much infuriation as Bourdoncle, feeling that it attacks the premise on which his shop is founded. However, he has a soft spot for Denise and does not want to fire her.

Denise's reputation is very important to her. When Bourdoncle fires her, she wants to know why. At the answer of meeting a man in the basement, she defends herself. She does not mind leaving, but wants to be sure that Mouret knows the truth about what happened. Deloche provides foreshadowing when he says, "'Oh, if only she could succeed somewhere else,' the young man said. 'Then I'd like her to come back here and trample all over them, these mediocrities!'" (Chapter 6, p. 176).



Chapter 7 Analysis

The recurring theme of this chapter is resisting the urge to give in. Bourras' obstinate resistance to selling out to Mouret mirrors Denise's refusal to get a lover to take care of her. His refusal to take the fortune Mouret offers him is just like the fortune that Mouret offers Denise later. Neither Bourras nor Denise wants to be bought. Bourras also thinks that Denise looks too respectable to live in his house, where the ladies are all prostitutes. All the men that follow her know she must succumb to having a lover soon. In fact, Denise is embarrassed of what Mouret would think of her if he found out she was living there. The symbolism of Bourras' house falling apart foreshadows the deaths in the neighborhood.

Robineau's plans for competing with Au Bonheur des Dames provides a backdrop for the discussions about how the large stores are killing the small stores. Just as Bourras and Denise will not give in, Robineau also plans to resist the urge to give up. While at Robineau's, Denise begins to understand the new business form and its power for success and change in Paris. Vinçard arrives to show the reader how pleased he is to have gotten unburdened by his dying business. He tries to maintain the premise that he left because of his health, attributing his better health now to the better climate in the country.

The plot between Denise and Mouret advances when they meet in the gardens and take a walk together. Mouret treats Denise as an equal, as she shares her intelligent business ideas. Mouret knows where she is living and where she is working, and he wonders why she stays with his enemies.



Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 focuses on the Baudu family, shop, and neighbors over the next several months. Vieil Elbeuf is shrinking as the competition across the street expands. Symbols of darkness and ruin foreshadow the upcoming events. Geneviève's hair falling over her face, covering her in blackness foreshadows the wasting girl's fate later in the novel. Baudu varies between despair, feeling it is useless to struggle against his competition, and an outrage at the changing business climate in Paris that propels him to continue.

This chapter discusses more about how the large stores are so successful. Robineau realizes that Denise is right about the big store. The continuous turnover of capital is the secret. This chapter also provides a commentary on the store's effect on families through the Lhomme family. Baudu envies their money, but does not want to give up what he has in family life to get it. The irony is that later, he loses his family by not changing his ways.

Madame Baudu knows why Geneviève is wasting away, but she will not talk about it with her husband. She also explains it to herself by suggesting that Geneviève inherited her weaknesses, and that growing up in a dark, stuffy shop does not make for good health. Baudu really wants Colomban to resist the postponement of the marriage and business take-over. His pride prevents him from passing on a near-bankruptcy, but he would give in with a word from Colomban.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The imagery of this chapter compares the expanded store with a church or a temple, designed to provide a place for lady customers to "worship." This temple is also the place of woman's greatest temptation, designed to part her with her money. Mouret believes that women are powerless to resist against his advertising schemes and low prices. Madame Marty and Madame de Boves prove he is right (at least with some women). Madame de Boves gives into the temptations offered at the store by stealing. She looks, and must touch, and she is trying to put some lace up her sleeve when her husband sees her in the store. Madame Marty becomes ill with her spending spree. The customers also provide a look at the theme of the blurring of class lines.

The expanded store is so big, it blocks the sun from the neighborhood, adding to the dark and dreary images symbolizing the death of the old ways. This chapter also contains several images of floods and rushing rivers, as well as battle images symbolizing the battle between new Paris and old Paris.

Mouret begins to desire Denise. Bourdoncle is worried about Denise's affect on Mouret. Paul also notices that Mouret has lost his touch a bit. Madame Desforges sees the effect Denise has on Mouret and is jealous. Denise understands some of Madame Desforges' motives in the way she treats her, wasting her time, and having her go from one department to another and back. Madame Desforges sizes up her assumed rival, foreshadowing the end of the novel when the relationship finally comes to pass.

Denise thinks first about what people will think when she becomes under-buyer. She assumes they will think she is having an affair with Mouret and he has given her the job in return. Mouret is falling in love with her. However, he treats her like an object to be purchased, which offends Denise. Denise will not be bought, just as she would not take a lover to help her through her tough times or become a prostitute. Denise feels so grateful to Mouret, that a friendly word would conquer her, and allow the love she is starting to feel for him flourish.



Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter progresses the plot regarding the relationship between Mouret and Denise. Denise realizes that she never loved Hutin, but that from the first moment, she has always loved Mouret. Her feelings are conflicted because she loves Mouret, but she is not in his class, so she can only be his mistress. The relationship between Joseph and Madame de Fontenailles is another example of this cross-class love. Class is the main theme of this chapter, presenting the idea that the sales clerks represent a new class that is moving up in status. The scene in the dining room shows the much improved life that the sales clerks enjoy from what it was when Denise first started at Au Bonheur des Dames. One of the ideas that Denise has shared with Mouret is that happier, better-fed employees would be more profitable for Mouret. However, this chapter includes more images of slavery or imprisonment as well.

Everyone believes that a man like Mouret can have more than one woman. However, Denise tells Pauline that she is not a woman to share. When Denise says a man should marry the woman he loves like Pauline and Baugé, Pauline replies that she and Baugé are equals, implying that Denise cannot marry Mouret because of their different social status. Denise thinks that Mouret should not pursue her at all, since she knows she can only be mistress to him, and she absolutely refuses to do that. Mouret is surprised, because none of the girls he picked up ever cared about him loving them. Denise has finally gotten respect in her department, but it is implied that Mouret is behind this. Madame Aurélie is Mouret's confidant, and she wants to do what he wants. And the other girls want to do what Madame Aurélie wants.



Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter presents more on the theme of class. Bouthemont finds it strange that Madame Desforges confides so much in him compared to what his friends' mistresses would tell others. Madame Desforges tells Mouret that his store cannot dress distinguished women. However, Bouthemont points out that the lower prices are exactly why the distinguished ladies will not brag of wearing Au Bonheur des Dames' clothes. This chapter explains more about how the shop girls form a new, nameless class. Madame Desforges says all the salesgirls are for sale. The talk of the relationship between Madame de Fontenailles and Joseph points out the problem of cross-class relationships as well as the fall of the distinguished lady. Mouret's defense of Madame de Fontenailles foreshadows his own willingness to marry outside his class.

The secrecy in the affair between Monsieur de Boves and Madame Guibal contrasts to how Madame Desforges flaunts her affair with Mouret in front of Denise. Mouret is upset with Desforges for not concealing their affair from Denise, believing that not even a prostitute would be so familiar with a man in front of a stranger.

Mouret still wants to expand to take up the whole block and create an entrance on the new Rue du Dix Décembre. The Crédit Immobilier is still holding out against Mouret. Baron and Mouret talk about the store's increases in sales and turnover of capital. Baron supports Mouret instead of creating competition to the Grand Hôtel and plans to persuade the Crédit Immobilier. Baron teases Mouret about how women are getting their revenge on him, since he sees Mouret suffering. Mouret still does not understand the revenge. He thinks having to pay is enough. He does not realize that his suffering over Denise is payment for his past transgressions. Mouret tells Vallagnosc that simply having Denise is enough. It will end his obsession. Mouret's conversations with Vallagnosc solidify the feelings that his money cannot buy everything he wants.



Chapter 12 Analysis

Mouret thinks about how Denise has captivated him, especially since their walk together. He tries to convince himself to get over her, but he cannot. He does not understand her refusals of money or a higher position in the store, because he thinks she is ambitious. Denise's refusal makes him want her more. He is suffering with his obsession for her and disgusted by the empire he has built with no power to have her. His curiosity about how she would develop as a woman have turned into real love, as Mouret discovers that she has everything he wants in a woman. As he tours the store, he despairs that Denise still says no, and he finds his creation an insult since he has no power to convince her. The report of the day's takings at Lhomme's desk makes him hate money. He abuses his power, even though the power does nothing to satisfy his one desire.

The tour through the store provides a look at the improved conditions and expanded departments. Denise addresses the worst conditions of the store with her power, starting with the sudden dismissals. She convinces Mouret that it is in the owner's interest to take care of the employees. The orchestra makes many people happy (especially Lhomme), but it also provides some great publicity for the store. These changes, in addition to Denise's refusals of Mouret, are the revenge that Bourdoncle and Baron Hartman predicted.

Bourdoncle represents the thinking that married sales girls were no good anymore (such as in Pauline's case) and that working in a store would use up a woman by middle age (such as in Madame Aurélie's case). He is also sure that Denise will be the store's downfall, should Mouret give in to the temptation to marry her. His first instinct is to find grounds to fire her.

Denise reacts to Mouret's accusations with calm dignity. She chooses words his dead wife would have said when she assures him that women are usually respectable. She is simply without pretention or ambition, which makes her even more desirable to Mouret. When Pauline tells Denise that she could not have intended to get Mouret to marry her any more perfectly than the way she had acted, Denise is horrified. Denise does not think she wants that, but she has allowed her feelings for him to blossom, and in her mind, marriage is where love naturally leads. However, with the class issue, she is again upset, because she knows it is impossible. She is also worried about what everyone will think of her.

The scenes related to the thefts illustrate the weakness of a large store, and provide more insight on class in the way the management handles it. Madame Aurélie is a powerful, respectable woman, and having her son fired will cause gossip. Therefore, Arthur does not leave until two days later.



Chapter 13 Analysis

As Geneviève's hair consumes her face, so does the Au Bonheur des Dames consume its victims. Geneviève's death symbolizes the death of the old neighborhood and old ways of doing business. Many of the images in this chapter present the idea that some deaths are required for forward progress, as in a revolution. When the Vieil Elbeuf is covered in white for funeral, it contrasts the other images of darkness, elaborating on the idea that death is a necessary part of life.

The neighborhood victims of Au Bonheur des Dames who have had to go to work for other people bring up the theme of class again, as the shop owners go down in class when they work for someone else.

Denise finally understands the struggle for survival and accepts her place in that struggle. Denise has several dreams symbolizing the struggle for life. Denise knows about Mouret's affairs, exploitations, and deceit, but she feels that his continued suffering provides a means for purging all of his sins.

The windows symbolize life and death. Madame Baudu dies in January. Before she dies, she asks Baudu to open the windows, and she watches the monster across the street that devoured her family and her store. Denise closes the shutters when Robineau comes home injured to shut out the crowds, symbolizing the death of his store.

Chapter 14 Analysis

As the store gets ready for its opening after the final expansion, the images of white everywhere and the choices in decorating symbolize the renewal in the midst of the death of the old neighborhood. It is also the foreshadowing of marriage between Denise and Mouret, the king and queen of the store. The temple symbolism expands on the concept that the store is a new type of religion for the customers, even comparing it to a golden calf.

Denise knows that she will not be happy if she gives in to her love for Mouret. The gossip in the store gives her considerable anxiety, and she knows the only way she can be happy is to leave. This chapter discusses a number of other characters who are getting married, such as Jean, the customer Madame Boutarel's daughter, and the ladies' wear sales clerk Marguerite.

Mouret thinks Denise is marrying someone else because she will not tell him the real reason for her leaving. He struggles against marrying her and forcing her. Mouret still feels that his power and money are useless, but he still struggles against the idea of marrying Denise, both for her class and another reason. He has a superstitious idea that he should remain a bachelor to stay successful. While Bourdoncle shares this superstition, he now wants Mouret to go ahead and get married so that Bourdoncle can take Mouret's place as director of the store. Mouret finally senses that he has finished with conquering women, so he finally gives in to marriage. However, he will not let Bourdoncle devour him.

Denise fears that everyone will think she is a whore, even if she marries Mouret. This problem is solved by her leaving for Valgones. There, Mouret can come for her, marry her on her turf and her terms, and she can return to the store as a true queen.