

Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide

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

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Themes

Survival of the Fittest

This novel repeatedly presents the Darwinian idea that only the strongest survive. As Au Bonheur des Dames grows and becomes more and more successful, the neighborhood shops are driven out of business one by one. On several different occasions during the novel, Mouret explains why his department store is so successful, while the old-style trade shops refuse to change their ways to keep up with the times. In not being willing (or able) to change, the old shops prove to be weaker and therefore not able to survive in the new Paris.

The concept of survival of the fittest is also demonstrated on a different level in the silk department of the store. At first, Hutin undermines Robineau, even getting Bouthemont hired for the buyer position from the outside to prevent Robineau's promotion. Hutin wants Robineau's job. Once Hutin is under-buyer, he starts attacking Bouthemont to gain the buyer's position. When he is buyer, the whole process is now turned against him as Favier works to undermine him. Mouret is convinced that this competition is one of the secrets of his success, allowing only the best salesmen to remain in the department.

Denise presents this theme in a more personal context. As a tattered and somewhat timid salesgirl at first, she becomes the weakest sales clerk in the ladies' wear department. She therefore loses her job when it is time to make staff reductions. However, Denise has strength of character that no one else in the novel can match. She retains her dignity and honor in spite of terrible poverty. This strength of character allows her to survive, return to Au Bonheur des Dames, and quickly rise not only to a buyer's position, but the generally accepted "queen" of the shop.

Blurring of Class Lines

A major theme of *The Ladies' Delight* is the effect that the large department stores have on the long-accepted social structure. The first aspect of this is the new, indistinct class the sales girls make. The girls come in close contact with women from the middle and distinguished classes, and in response to this close contact, adopt speech, mannerisms, and dress of women from higher social classes. The girls in the ladies' wear department wear silk, a sign of a more distinguished social class than their individual origins. This is a source of competition between the ladies' wear department, and the lingerie department, who must wear woolen dresses for their uniforms. On the other hand, the morals of the sales girls are generally considered loose or questionable. Since no one believes that a woman can earn a living on her work, most of the sales girls take lovers to make additional money (either directly by being prostitutes, or indirectly, to get their lovers to buy them things or pay for their keep). The sales girls



also have little or no education, which is an important distinction between them and society women.

Another perspective of the department store's affect on social status structure is the customers. The department store, especially with marked and lowered prices, provides goods to lower and middle-class women that they had not previously been able to obtain. One of Mouret's ideas, having marked prices, especially affects middle-class ladies like Madame Marty. She feels that she is getting a bargain, and wanting to be like and impress society women like Madame Desforges, she spends uncontrollably. Her spending eventually ruins her husband. Another notable side of increasing the status of lower and middle-class women is the attitudes they adopt in the store, expecting the sales clerks to be servants to them. Hutin illustrates this point when he says, "'Forget it! She's a trollop. Who can tell nowadays with the distinguished airs they put on!'" (Chapter 4, p. 96).

Mademoiselle de Fontenailles presents another way class lines are blurred in this novel. She is an aristocratic woman whose fallen family did not provide her with enough education to get a proper line of work for a woman in her position. Madame Desforges is appalled at the type of work her protégée has to do in the store, although she had asked Mouret to find her a job in the first place. What outrages Madame Desforges even more is the eventual marriage between Mademoiselle de Fontenailles and Joseph, a common working man who is a porter in the store. Lying underneath this outrage, however, is the truth that working in the store provides a woman in these circumstances with a much better life than she would have on the streets, since she does not have to pay for a place to live, food to eat, or even clothes since she has a uniform to wear.

The main conflict in the novel involving class is the relationship between Mouret and Denise. Mouret simply cannot marry one of his sales clerks, women basically picked up off the streets. He cannot lower his social status that way, and everyone, both clerks in the store, and society gathered at Madame Desforges', agrees on that. Denise knows that Mouret cannot marry her. His first attempt at a date with her offends her so much because she knows the only thing she can be to him is a mistress. Mouret struggles against this long-held perception about how his class can behave, until he finally gives in to the idea of marrying her. When he accepts the idea of marrying Denise, he considers it folly, but he has gotten to the point that he will take that risk to have her.

Giving In

Many characters in *The Ladies' Delight* resist the forces around them. Baudu does not give up in the face of brutal competition from the department store across the street. This resistance eventually destroys his family. Bourras refuses to give his house and business to the department store, even when Mouret offers him a fortune. Bourras often compares his resistance to letting Mouret have his house to Denise's resistance to letting Mouret have her virtue. However, Bourras gains nothing by resisting. Denise gains everything by resisting. She retains her honor and dignity, and acquires power in

the store to really change things for the sales clerks and improve their lives. She becomes queen and ends up getting Mouret on her terms.

Other characters take a different path. Pauline, for example, gives in to the need to have a man take care of her. She has nothing to regret and ends up happily married to one of her lovers. However, Denise knows that Pauline's path is not for her. Colomban also gives in easily. Baudu wants him to resist postponing his marriage, but Colomban uses that resistance as a way to get out of dying in that shop with a girl he does not love. Finally, some of the customers show weakness. Madame Marty goes into the store for a braid, or just out of curiosity, but ends up purchasing so much it makes her ill. Madame Bourdelais goes in to entertain her children. She, too, gives into the advertising and temptations in the store. Even Madame Desforges, who goes to the store to find out if the rumors about Mouret and Denise are true and determined not to buy anything, finds she cannot leave the store without a trinket.