

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis proposes to analyze the dichotomous representation of the female model as benevolent and malevolent in three 19th-century French novels. Honoré de Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1834), Jules and Edmond de Goncourt's *Manette Salomon* (1867), and Émile Zola's *The Masterpiece* (1886) are all novels set in artist's workshops and portray the female model as playing an essential role in determining the success, then demise of the male painter. My study of these texts will therefore focus on the juxtaposed presentations of the female models in terms of their relationships to the male artists.

Before addressing each literary work, I will first touch upon the situation of women in 19th-century France in order to provide a historical context for the novels. It is also beneficial to examine briefly the historic aesthetic perceptions of the female form and representation of it in painting of the concerned century. Furthermore, the ideas of contemporary French feminists who have extensively written on women's relationship to men provide the theoretical foundation for my reading of these novels.

The situated female

In the revolutionary text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir approaches the situation of western women from scientific, philosophical, mythical and historical angles. She notes that “the term ‘female’ is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex.”¹ The connotation of the word *female* embeds itself in the image of “a womb, an ovary,” defining woman according to her sexual organs and thus her role as a reproducer. By limiting woman to her reproductive function, the term *female* imprisons her to her relationship with man. Beauvoir asserts that in a patriarchal culture, the male is considered the creator, and the female the receptacle for creation.² As such, woman must assume a subordinate position to man.

Beauvoir’s word choice of “imprison” in the previous quotation creates a striking image of female oppression. One may visualize woman trapped within the (w)hole of her body which exists to receive man, and likewise trapped within male discourse, excluded from partaking in the creation and enforcement of politics, law, religion, education, etc. It is a portrait of woman constrained within her body’s reproductive function and excluded from the patriarchal power that establishes her role as a reproducer. Here one finds that the significance of woman’s reproductive role signifies her societal role as well. *The Second Sex* sets forth that “the body is not a thing, it is a situation. . . it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects.”³ For Beauvoir, woman’s situation manifests itself as the prison of the wedding ring, the home and the crib, where the bride, wife and mother are trapped.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974) 3.

² Beauvoir 22-23.

³ Beauvoir 38.

Writing from a 20th-century perspective, Beauvoir clearly understood woman's place in history. In *French Feminism in the 19th Century*, Claire Moses concludes that three primary factors subordinated French women of the 1800s. Firstly, women were usually financially dependent upon men. Social custom did not permit bourgeois women to venture into the work force, so they were reliant upon their husbands to provide for them. Urban proletariat women, on the other hand, were frequently obliged to seek jobs. They, however, were not spared from dependency for they were bound to men for capitalistic reasons. Whether working as laborers in factories or as domestics in bourgeois homes, lower class women were subject to the authority of their male employers and dependent upon the pay which they provided. Those women who turned to prostitution also counted on men, feeding upon the fees they collected from their male clientele. In addition to being economically tied to men, whether husbands, employers or clients, women were also dependent upon males to legitimize their social standing and respectability. For example, a bourgeois woman's social acceptance correlated to her husband's status, and a woman needed a man to legally claim paternity to her children, because a woman with an illegitimate child was culturally shunned. Finally, women were oppressed to the greatest extent through exclusion from political, institutional and commercial domains.⁴

Griselda Pollock comments on the situation of 19th-century French women in terms of public and private spheres. She explains how housewives and wedded mothers were virtuously regarded, while women who partook in non-quotidian domains were deemed unvirtuous. Pollock describes the established relationship between the two spheres for

⁴ Claire Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th-Century* (New York: SUNY, 1984) 17-40.

women as being “the polarity virgin/whore.”⁵ For instance, prostitutes in brothels, show girls at the *folies*, *café-concerts* and the like, were reduced to sexual commodities. For women who occupied the private sphere, there was a moral risk to be out in public: “For women, the public spaces thus construed were where one risked losing one’s virtue, dirtying oneself; going out in public and the idea of disgrace were closely allied.”⁶ The above reveals the great role conceptions of morality played in separating women of public and private spheres, and suggests that circulating in the public sphere posed a threat to all women.

Pollock keenly observes that while women’s morality was delineated by their surrounding environment, men were free to traverse both spheres without moral repercussions. In the home, men were respectable husbands and fathers and in the brothel free to follow their desires. Pollock associates man’s freedom to partake in the public spheres with modernity. The “flâneur,” one free to wander city streets and gaze without the fear of being gazed at, found liberty in the city as he could go unnoticed in the crowd and nonchalantly fulfill his fancies. For Pollock, the flâneur was most certainly male, the female “flâneuse” non-existent, for woman was the object of the male gaze.⁷

Men’s freedom to occupy both the public and private and their further ability to gaze at the females situated in each, demonstrates the male’s social power. Given that they were the only ones who had the ability to freely operate in both spheres, must it not be they who defined them? Furthermore, one may deduce that these spheres were constructed in a manner which oppressed women, while providing for men’s freedom of

⁵ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism and the History of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) 78.

⁶ Pollock 69.

movement and authority. One of the methods employed to contain women within the separate spheres and assert patriarchal authority was through the surveillance of women's conduct, particularly their sexual morals.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault looks at sexuality as a historical construct and surveillance as a means of enforcing it, focusing his study on French society. He notes that in the 17th century there was an ever increasing silencing of sexuality which centered around familial alliance and heterosexual reproduction. The silence produced discourses professing the danger of sexuality. By the 18th century “a policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses,”⁸ such as medical, religious, judicial and educational ones, was established. A “deployment of sexuality”⁹ firmly took root in the familial alliance during the 19th century. Rather than emphasizing reproduction, it focused on establishing the body's desire and sensuality. Four principal strategies were employed: the repression of children's sexuality, the hysterization of women's bodies, the abhorrence of non-heterosexuals, and the regulation of population growth.¹⁰ The bourgeoisie applied this criteria among their own class as a means of homogenizing it in order to distinguish its class' superiority and to assert their strength, longevity, health and political power. “What was formed was a political ordering of life, not through an enslavement of others, but through an affirmation of self.”¹¹ It is more appropriate to note that it was an affirmation of the male bourgeoisie which took root in the 19th century.

⁷ Pollock 66-69.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 25.

⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. The “Deployment of Sexuality” is the title of Part 4.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 104-5.

¹¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 123.

Michel Foucault and Griselda Pollock treat issues of gender, sexuality, class and power. I have diagrammed some of the relationships between these four categories based on Pollock and Foucault's commentaries (Fig. 1). Women feature in all four sections. They are situated in terms of their sexual conduct and class, separated from each other as the axes' bold lines indicate. In the private they are respectable wives, mothers and family members. In the public they are subject to be spectacles, whether as show girls or respectable women attending the opera. One finds the presence of men in all categories as well. Of particular significance is the sphere of the public domain of discourse and authority which is occupied primarily by the male bourgeoisie. The dotted lines denote their freedom to permeate the other three spheres and control the movements of those women whom patriarchal discourses have situated there.

GENDER, CLASS, SITUATION AND POWER IN 19TH-CENTURY FRANCE

	PUBLIC	PRIVATE
BOURGEOISIE	<u>Men</u> politicians educators business men men of law physicians <u>Women</u> spectators guests	<u>Men</u> fathers husbands sons brothers <u>Women</u> mothers wives daughters sisters
PROLETARIAT	<u>Men</u> laborers <u>Women</u> laborers prostitutes performers	<u>Men</u> fathers husbands sons brothers <u>Women</u> mothers wives daughters sisters

Fig. 1

The directed female

One of the principal tactics by which men in the public sphere manipulated women was through the hysterization of the female body. *Hysteria* comes from the Greek *hyster* which means womb. Since antiquity, hysteria has been considered a “disease” inflicting women, associated with excessive sexual desire which plagues the procreative situation of the female. At the beginning of the 1800s in France, it was professed that hysteria struck the womb, a region of the female body over which woman had little control and was treated medically. Towards the end of the century, it was defined as a neurological disorder and treated through psychotherapy. Whether directly plaguing the female womb or affecting it through a disorder of the brain, hysteria’s cure lay in man’s observations, classifications and treatments.¹² Foucault comments on the multiple ways by which man’s knowledge manipulated female hysteria.

A hysterization of women’s bodies: a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed—qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education): the Mother, with her negative image of “nervous women,” constituted the most visible form of this hysterization.¹³

This passage highlights men’s defining of women’s sexuality and their methods of situating women through discourses. Such clinical treatment of the female body reinforced the oppression of women.

¹² Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *A History of Private Life IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: Belknap, 1990) 624-6.

¹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 104.

In the first portion of *The Newly Born Woman*, “The Guilty One,”¹⁴ Catherine Clément analyzes historic images of woman as sorceress and hysteric. She includes the tale of the Tarantula in which women who claim to have been bitten by imaginary spiders become hysterical. In order to cure their abominable illness, a celebration is held in which the women dance to rid themselves of the imaginary bites. Spectators gather to witness the hysterical women’s convulsing bodies, arched backs and screams. Upon exhaustion, the women rest, lie peacefully cured, “settle down again under a roof, in a house, in the family circle of kinship and marriage.”¹⁵ This tale resembles instances of female hysteria documented by Doctor Charcot, a prominent 19th-century French psychiatrist, whose work I will discuss further on.

Clément’s excerpt exemplifies the vicious bite of social conformity that subdues women to subordinating themselves to the patriarchal order. The story reveals how any deviation from “normal” behavior in man’s world defines woman as a hysteric and excludes her from being a welcomed member of patriarchal society. Paradoxically, society simultaneously encircles her. She becomes a spectacle expected to perform and assume the definition of hysteric assigned to her. Woman is only applauded when she resumes her familial place in the home, confirming her hysteria to have been simply a performance. She is clearly “the theater of the body”¹⁶ and patriarchal society the director. Clément shows how myths like that of the Tarantula are perpetuated in order to theatricize woman’s movements, to confirm that it is the imaginary that plagues hysterics and sorceresses, and to celebrate only the sane woman’s subscription to patriarchal boundaries

¹⁴ Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986).

¹⁵ Clément 19-22.

and control. These myths unveil the arena of the “imaginary zone,” the place where patriarchal culture holds “what it excludes.”¹⁷

In 19th-century France, there are multiple references to the theatrization of the female body. From 1863-1893, there was actually a theater for the display of female hysteria in Paris. The psychiatrist Dr. Charcot conducted the Theater of the Salpêtrière in a psychiatric hospital. It is noted that “the theater of hysteria may have been a mere tactic in a subtle economy of male desire.”¹⁸ Men from various domains came to watch the hysteric, erotic and nervous exhibitions of women. They “found it tempting to confuse the manifestations of the illness with those of orgasm and with the provocative behavior of streetwalkers.”¹⁹ It is speculated that the displayed women were indeed performers who took part in orchestrated stagings. The myths exhibited at the Salpêtrière were further told in real theaters where actresses of the time copied the hysteric patients’ actions on stage. French authors of the era also modeled some characteristics of female characters after Charcot’s patients.²⁰ The hysterization of the female body infiltrated 19th-century society on these multiple platforms of medicine, theater and literature to affirm that patriarchal culture surveyed and directed the female body.

In the fine arts, one finds an additional instance in which the patriarchal order assumes a directorial role in its rapport with the female body. In *The Nude*, art historian Kenneth Clark contrasts the “Naked” model to the painted “Nude.”²¹ He professes the former to be shamefully unclothed and organic, while the latter is robed by the male artist

¹⁶ Clément 10.

¹⁷ Clément 6.

¹⁸ Ariès 631.

¹⁹ Ariès 631.

²⁰ Ariès 629-633.

in the cultural and aesthetic. The artist works the female model's body into a creation separate from herself. He notes that "the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art."²²

The Nude is representative of man's perception of ideal beauty. Identifying with the male artist, Kenneth Clark exclaims: "we do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect,"²³ implying that the female is naturally imperfect. The concept of perfection to which Clark refers may be traced back to classical Greece where the beauty of the human form is constructed using mathematical conventions. Clark cites da Vinci and Cesariono's "Vitruvian" men inscribed in circles and squares. He addresses the role geometric proportions play in the female nude, citing how distances between and sizes of rounded bellies and breasts alter with society's transformed perceptions of ideal beauty. He indicates that "the disposition of areas in the torso is related to our most vivid experiences, so that, abstract shapes, the square and the circle, seem to us male and female; and the old endeavor of magical mathematics to square the circle is like the symbol of physical union."²⁴ Clark's words sketch a phallic image, symbolized by the artist's rigid frame, as encompassing or boxing in the rounded female anatomy. The established "physical union" he comments on is in fact male physical control that enforces the necessity of the active male and passive female dichotomy. The male artist directs the female: he situates her in a pose, then continues to further regulate her body through the

²¹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 3-29.

²² Kenneth Clark 5.

²³ Kenneth Clark 6.

²⁴ Kenneth Clark 27.

creation of what Clark terms her “body re-formed.”²⁵ Finally, he immobilizes her within his frame to be an object of man’s gaze.

Scanning 19th-century French Salon painting, one notices the popularity of the female nude. Favored works depicted mythical figures and goddesses, women modeled from but not representative of the average working-class woman of the 1800s. The numerous paintings of Venus up until the 1860s, such as Ingres’ *Vénus Anadyomène* and Cabanel’s *La Naissance de Vénus*, attest to this aesthetic preference for non-contemporary women. Such images portray women as voyeuristic objects, indicated by the passive nature of their poses, their non-interactive gazes and their air of availability.²⁶ These images were embraced by Salon officials, who were exclusively male at that time, because they permitted the pleasure of safely gazing at the nude female form without overtly acknowledging its desire and sexuality.

When a painting did represent a contemporary woman, the work was treated as a spectacle. Let us take the example of Manet’s tableau *Olympia* which was met with scandalous distaste at the Salon of 1865. The painting suggests that the woman portrayed is a prostitute; Images such as her slippers, cheap jewelry and rumpled bedding, and the title *Olympia*, a name popular among prostitutes of the time, connote this. T.J. Clark asserts that the most obvious sign of Olympia’s prostitution is her “nakedness.” Her sexuality has not been transformed into a fine nude, disguised by mythical image, or surrounded by a goddess’ aura. On the contrary, her naked body starkly stands out, acknowledging that “we are nowhere but in a body, constructed by it, by the way it

²⁵ Kenneth Clark 3.

²⁶ Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 23-26.

incorporates the signs of other people.”²⁷ In short, her nakedness is something shared by all.

The most disturbing aspect of the work for 19th-century spectators was Olympia’s gaze which stares out at the spectator. Coupled with her unabashed nakedness, this gaze acknowledges her body’s sexuality and that of the person viewing it. T.J. Clark cites that “it [desire] was there in her gaze, her address to the viewer, her consciousness of being looked at for sexual reasons and paid accordingly.”²⁸ He suggests that *Olympia* questioned the frontier delineating the buyer and seller of sex in 19th-century France. T.J. Clark deals with the blurring of this division primarily in terms of social class. As I indicated earlier, it is not only a question of social class that is at stake, but one of gender and power as well. Gazing at the spectator, Olympia challenged the male’s control over the female body. She confronted him with the illicit in the licit domain of the museum. T.J. Clark notes that “the ultimate cause of the critics’ difficulty with *Olympia* in 1865 was the degree to which she did not take part in the game of prostitution, and the extent to which she indicated the place of that game in class.”²⁹ In other words, she was out of bounds.

The public’s admonishment of *Olympia* indicates the patriarchal order’s failure to always contain the female. More importantly, however, it shows how phallo-centric ideology continually attempts to redefine borders which contain women through discourse. T.J. Clark cites how critics of the time turned *Olympia* into a spectacle to be ridiculed by the public. Their critiques evaded the question of Olympia’s sexuality by

²⁷ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 146.

²⁸ T.J. Clark 131.

²⁹ T.J. Clark 146.

displacing it through the negation of the painted female figure as being dirty, foul, ill and morbid.³⁰ Such harsh reactions from the public prevented the work from occupying a glorified place in the 19th-century French public realm. Frances Borel states that the work was banned from the Louvre until 1907.³¹ The ridiculing reception of *Olympia* paralleled that of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, exhibited at the Salon des Refusés in 1863. This painting also portrays a naked woman of the lower class, defiantly gazing out at the spectator. Borel indicates that "Manet's contemporaries, not daring to let themselves be seduced, resorted to uproarious laughter to hide their uneasiness—not to say fear."³²

The feared female

Contemporary feminists have addressed at length the history of male apprehension regarding the female body and specifically its sexuality. At the beginning of this introduction, I mentioned Simone de Beauvoir's recognition of how woman's sex situates her in society. Since Beauvoir published *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949, French and American intellectuals have worked not only to unveil the subordinated situation of women in patriarchal society, but also to examine why women are oppressed and to offer ways of overcoming this situation. The French feminist Luce Irigaray provides a number of useful perspectives from which to view the three novels studied here.

In "Volume without contours,"³³ Irigaray sets forth that woman's difficulty of asserting herself flows from the fluid nature of her sexual difference. She takes an inside look at woman's *écart* or vaginal opening which distinguishes her from man: "Woman is

³⁰ T.J. Clark 96.

³¹ Frances Borel, *The Seduction of Venus: Artists and Models* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) 112.

³² Borel 109.

neither closed nor open. Indefinite, unfinished/in-finite, *form is never complete in her.*³⁴

She illustrates woman's constant metamorphosis with the provocative image of the lips of the female genitalia: "Lips of the same form --yet never simply defined—overlap by retouching one another, referring one (to) the other for a perimeter that nothing arrests in *one* configuration."³⁵ Irigaray's formulations counter those of Clark in that they indicate the female may never be squared. The amorphous nature of the female body seems to exempt it from the possibility of being contained by the patriarchal order. Irigaray recognizes, however, that woman's *jouissance*, her sexual pleasure, which cannot be pinpointed to any one moment, act or thing does hinder woman since it prevents her from identifying herself with just one thing, word, symbol, etc. In a patriarchal world built upon a symbolic foundation, woman finds herself unable to define herself symbolically or verbally and thus unable to free herself from definitions which confine her.

Woman's inability to verbalize her own *jouissance* and body is set in motion by man's fear of her sexual difference. While he "needs an instrument to touch himself,"³⁶ is dependent upon something or someone, she seems to need nothing. Her kissing lips are representative of her autonomy: she may find pleasure within herself. Man's fear of woman's self-feeling is manifested in his quest for self-assertion. By making her his object, his creation, he becomes Man, the creator. His need for an instrument assumes various forms in this process. He confronts her fluidity, which threatens his subjectivity, with the instrumental mirror of the speculum and "pierces, drills, bores a volume still

³³ Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 53-68.

³⁴ Irigaray 55.

³⁵ Irigaray 56.

³⁶ Irigaray 58.

assumed to be solid.”³⁷ Man desires to transform the fluid *écart* into a mirror which reflects his power: “all water must become a mirror, all seas, a glass.”³⁸ Her body must become nothing more than “a glass for the ‘subject’ to gaze upon himself and reproduce himself in his reflection,” “a fertile ground to plant its [his] seed.”³⁹ Man’s fear of woman’s sexual difference leads him to define her body in relationship to his own sexuality.

Man conducts his reforming and situating of the female with the most powerful tool: Language. Irigaray asserts that “the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language and symbols which cannot take root in it except in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of women and in the site of their identity.”⁴⁰ Patriarchal language reduces woman to the passive role of being a recipient for reproduction. By determining her societal role in terms of her sexuality, the patriarchal order restricts the female body and in doing so establishes man’s power.

We come full circle to the notion that man limits woman’s movements by confining her body’s situation in order to establish his superiority and authority. Clément states the importance of illuminating the mechanics of patriarchal control over women, the way in which it controls the female body while excluding it: “in telling it, in developing it, even in plotting it, I seek to undo it, to overturn it, to reveal it, to expose it.”⁴¹ Following Clément’s lead, I hope to unveil how the male artists depicted in three 19th-century French

³⁷ Irigaray 64.

³⁸ Irigaray 64.

³⁹ Luce Irigaray 66.

⁴⁰ Luce Irigaray 41.

⁴¹ Clément 6.

texts simultaneously embrace and exclude their female models. As long as they assert their artistic genius by manipulating the female body, the models are represented as their virgin-like inspiration. When the painters fail to contain these women, they are inversely represented as the evil cause of their destruction. In Chapter Two, I will examine this dichotomous treatment of women in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, focusing on the male gaze. I will then look at the paradoxical presentation of the model's body in the Goncourt brothers' *Manette Salomon*, as framed by the artist in the image of ideal beauty and also as a frame which encompasses him. Chapter Four will build upon the significance of the gaze and frame in order to analyze the bipolar treatment of female sexuality in Zola's *The Masterpiece*.

Chapter Two: The Un/known Female in *The Unknown Masterpiece*

The artist employs his gaze to situate his subject and thereby affirm his power. Michel Foucault's description of Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas* provides an appropriate parallel to issues I will address in this chapter.⁴² In this tableau, the painter portrays himself looking at a subject outside of the frame that he is in the midst of representing on the canvas before him. The aristocratic figures painted beside him are also captivated by what the artist focuses on. A framed mirror in the background of the work reveals its subject: the King and Queen of Spain. Their mirrored eyes illuminate the center of the painting which reflects back to the artist's central role in multiple ways. Hanging on the wall, the mirror is like a canvas that represents what the painter sees. The mirrored portrait portrays the King and Queen looking at Velasquez. The attention of the other figures in the painting is also directed at the artist. When they look into the royal couple's eyes, their gaze is diverted back to the painter. So *Las Meninas*, which appears to illustrate that which is invisible, is ironically a representation of the authoritative visibility of the artist's presence and vision.

In *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the power of the artist's presence and perspective is clearly seen. In this 19th-century text, Honoré de Balzac tells the tale of three 17th-century

male artists. Porbus is a master academic painter, the youthful Poussin a budding artist, and Frenhofer a mysterious and aging painter. Within the text, these men concentrate on representations of women. The identities of the female figures, however, are hardly developed. This chapter will examine how the male artist in Balzac's text uses the female subject as a foil for enforcing a dominant male presence and perspective. It will further elucidate that when the artist's gaze succeeds in manipulating woman to establish his authority, she appears saintly, and when his eye fails to capture and render her to his liking, she is negated.

Male Presence and Perspective

In the 1970s, Laura Mulvey began commenting on man's voyeuristic and narcissistic treatment of women in Hollywood films. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"⁴³ Mulvey reveals how American movies establish women as the passive objects of the active male gaze. The commanding male perspective not only pervades within the film, but from an exterior position as well. Mulvey further claims that spectators tend to identify with the principal gaze. In addition, the male spectator, from his seat in the dark theater, has the opportunity to peer into the private domain of the film and perceive the female images presented within this arena as erotic objects. One finds that "the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence."⁴⁴ A triangular exchange between

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans (London: Tavistock, 1970) 3-16.

⁴³ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1959) 14-28.

⁴⁴ Mulvey 20.

male characters, female images and spectators is established, and it is always controlled by the male characters' authority.

This triangular metaphor may readily be applied to Balzac's literary text. The first portion of this chapter will examine how the story establishes the authority of the male characters, how these male figures look at the female ones, and how the reader's gaze is continually directed to the male characters.

In Balzac's literary work, visual descriptions and metaphors, which favor men over women, establish a dominant male presence. In the novel's opening pages, Poussin is described as timidly pacing the street like a "gallant who dares not venture into the presence of the mistress whom he loves for the first time, easy of access though she may be."⁴⁵ He is subsequently referred to as "a gentleman" going to court.⁴⁶ Given the social class-divisions of noble, bourgeois and common people in French society, one infers that the "gentleman" assumes a social and moral status superior to that of an easy mistress. The second set of images are similar in comparison. As Poussin enters the home or "court" of Porbus, who is referred to as a "king,"⁴⁷ he passes an old cleaning woman. Once again, the male is described in noble terms whereas the female is portrayed as a commoner. Such class distinct images between men and women create a gendered hierarchy in which the female image is defined as inferior to the male character.

The dominant male presence literally casts a shadow over the image of the female within the domain of the artist's studio. A single window in Porbus's studio shines light on the male figures, illuminating their presence. For example, the text notes that "the light

⁴⁵ Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1901) 211.

⁴⁶ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 211.

⁴⁷ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 211.

from the window in the roof fell full upon Porbus' pale face."⁴⁸ In the French version, this description is highlighted by the image of an "*auréole*,"⁴⁹ or halo, which encircles the painter. Curiously, the symbol of the halo is frequently used in painting to outline the head of God and other religious figures. Like the artist, the painter's easel is also ringed in light, filling "an illuminated circular space."⁵⁰ Porbus's companion Frenhofer is associated with luminosity as well. He emerges from a shadowed staircase as if "one of Rembrandt's portraits might have stepped down from its frame to walk in an appropriate atmosphere of gloom."⁵¹ Even in dim light, the male presence is vividly seen.

Compared to the majestic male presence, the female is left in the dark. Her body is valued as an object whereas the male is compared to individuals. She is indirectly alluded to in the image of old curtains "flung carelessly down to serve as a model."⁵² The symbol of the curtain is particularly appropriate since curtains function to obscure light and are thus associated with darkness. Another more direct allusion to women is that of the fragmented "torsos of antique goddesses, worn smooth as though all the years of the centuries that had passed over them had been lovers' kisses."⁵³ This representation of woman leaves her fragmented, immobilized and passive to the male's lips. The dichotomy between the illuminated and animated male and the shadowed and stationary female, brings to mind Frances Borel's commentary on the relationship between artist and model.

⁴⁸ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 214.

⁴⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef d'Oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) 64.

⁵⁰ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 214.

⁵¹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 213.

⁵² Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 214.

⁵³ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 214.

She indicates the situation as follows: “on one side, the artist armed with the tools of his trade; on the other, the model, immobilized in a pose.”⁵⁴

One of the artist’s principal tools is his eye. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger examines gender roles in relationship to the sense of sight. He concludes: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁵⁵ In the process, woman is diminished to being a sight. Poussin’s lover Gilette attests to this when she refuses to pose for him any more, stating “I will never consent to do such a thing again, for your eyes say nothing all the while. You do not think of me at all, and yet you look at me.”⁵⁶ This citation reveals not only how the model is subjected to the artist’s gaze, but how his stare blurs her identity to the point that she feels unseen.

A specific example of the artist’s gaze reducing the female identity is apparent in the scene where Frenhofer repaints Porbus’s *Saint Mary of Egypt*. Frenhofer scrutinizes the painted woman, paying no attention to Saint Mary’s identity. The central figure is simply referred to as “about to pay her passage across the seas.”⁵⁷ No mention is made that she paid the voyage in flesh by prostituting her body. Rather than acknowledging the autonomy of her body, the artist zooms in on her anatomy, fragmenting her person as he comments on her throat, breast, shoulder and hand. Frenhofer further diminishes the female when he repaints the figure working without a model. In this moment, the woman is mitigated to being even less than an object of man’s gaze. She becomes a figment of his imagination.

⁵⁴ Borel 91.

⁵⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1978) 47.

⁵⁶ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 229.

⁵⁷ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 214.

The male artist intentionally occults the female's autonomy. Frenhofer paradoxically criticizes Porbus's Saint Mary: "You draw a woman, yet you do not see her! . . . You are reproducing mechanically the model that you copied in your master's studio."⁵⁸ Porbus has committed the fallacy of trying to reproduce reality's likeness. The result is a Saint with a throat "cold as marble," a body where the "blood does not flow," "a statue," "a corpse."⁵⁹ Frenhofer asserts that the artist's goal is not to look outwards and reproduce an image of nature, but rather to focus inwards and reproduce what he aesthetically envisions. The painted figure should be an extension of the painter, filled with his breath, soul and "touched by the divine flame."⁶⁰

When the artist reifies the female figure into a creation of his being through painting, he truly occults her identity. According to Kenneth Clark, "the naked body is no more than the point of departure for a work of art, it is a pretext of great importance. . . it [the work of art] is ourselves and arouses memories of all the things we wish to do with ourselves; and first of all we wish to perpetuate ourselves."⁶¹ Clark insists that the artist is a creator, while the female form is simply a recipient or uterus for his aesthetic creation. A vivid example that confirms these gender roles appears in *The Unknown Masterpiece*. When Frenhofer repaints the Saint Mary, he provides her with the blood that flows through her veins, and it is his name she wears in the form of a signature.⁶² These images are strikingly significant when one considers that it is by blood and title that heredity is passed and social identity established in patriarchal society.

⁵⁸ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 217.

⁵⁹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 215.

⁶⁰ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 215.

⁶¹ Kenneth Clark 8.

⁶² Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 220-1.

As a creator, the male artist occupies an omnipotent position. The prior noted descriptions of Porbus as a “king” and the luminous aura enshrining the artists and their work allude to this. The majestic descriptions of Frenhofer further confirm the artist’s god-like character. Frenhofer is considered “more than a man,” one “beyond the limits of human nature,”⁶³ a “supernatural being.”⁶⁴ The artist does not simply paint, but is Painting. He is “Art incarnate, Art with its mysteries, its vehement passion and its dreams.”⁶⁵ The descriptions of this “god of painting,”⁶⁶ emphasize the significance of his gaze. For example, the “magnetic power”⁶⁷ of Frenhofer’s eyes attracts Poussin’s attention, and the “unearthly glitter”⁶⁸ of his pupils mesmerizes him.

Frenhofer aptly compares the artist’s creative power to that of a poet. He scolds Porbus, stating: “The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet!”⁶⁹ Just as a poet uses language to evoke life, a painter uses paints to express it. Whether with the tooled tip of a pen or a brush, each employs an abstract system of signs and symbols to convey what they see. Hence, the creator constructs a reality of his own which is molded by his perception. As Mary Ann Caws comments, “the artist’s point of view is of necessity manipulating. . . all art is derived from the hand, after the eye.”⁷⁰

In *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the artist’s perception manipulates the female. Let us return to the example of the *Saint Mary*. Frenhofer’s Saint Mary is his creation, an

⁶³ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 225.

⁶⁴ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 226.

⁶⁵ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 226.

⁶⁶ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 223.

⁶⁷ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 213.

⁶⁸ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 221.

⁶⁹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 217.

extension of himself. He treats the painted woman as a metaphorical mirror in which he sees his reflection. It is also the surface in which he seeks reflection of his ability to create. Or in other words, where he looks for affirmation of himself. So, when the artist looks at his creation not only does a reflexive activity occur, but a reciprocal action is desired. This phenomenon is highlighted in the scene where Frenhofer takes out an actual mirror to view his vision by reflection. As Frenhofer applies this artistic technique, one may infer a complex exchange of gazes: the artist sees himself in the canvas, the painted image is reflected in the mirror, and in it the artist sees his gaze reflected back at himself.

If we were to describe these ideas of reflexivity and reciprocity in French, the same verb, *se regarder*, would be used to express both actions. The former would be *Il se regarde*, he looks at himself, and the latter *Ils se regardent*, they look at each other. The only linguistic difference is the subject which multiplies in the reciprocal exchange. This multiplication of the subject is quite intriguing. In effect, since the painting is essentially the painter, there is truly only one subject, the artist. This implies that through his creation, the artist may cunningly create his own reciprocity.

In *The Unknown Masterpiece*, the individual achievement of what I would like to term *reflexive-reciprocity* is the artist's ultimate vision. He seeks to create something outside of the self with which to exchange glances. In the story, the artist strives to paint an ideal representation of a woman that will vividly confirm his omnipotent character. This is apparent in Frenhofer's struggle to complete his *Belle Noiseuse*. For ten years he has worked from a mental image creating this painting of the courtesan Catherine

⁷⁰ Mary Ann Caws, "Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 266.

Lescault. Like Pygmalion,⁷¹ Frenhofer is in love with his aesthetic figure and fondly calls the woman his “bride.”⁷² Disillusioned by love, Frenhofer believes the painting “is not a canvas, it is a woman—a woman with whom I talk.”⁷³ He is convinced that when the painted figure is finished, it will transcend the canvas and come to life. This living woman, an extension of himself, will exchange his gaze. Through this masterpiece, Frenhofer hopes to arrive at reflexive-reciprocity without the aid of a mirror. By completing the impossible, he will transcend the structure of reality and truly enter an exterior, omnipotent realm.

Frenhofer’s work beholds extraordinary possibilities not only for himself, but for fellow artists as well. The young Poussin devises a plan to aid the painter in completing his work. Poussin’s lover Gilette will pose for Frenhofer’s tableau, and in return Frenhofer will unveil his completed creation to Poussin. This reciprocal exchange between two artists is marked by Poussin’s desire to arrive at his own reflexive-reciprocity. By witnessing Frenhofer’s transcendence, he hopes to come closer to constructing his own.

When Poussin schemes to manipulate the body of his lover, he loses sight of Gilette as an individual. The moment she consents to his plan, the text notes that “Poussin forgot everything but art.”⁷⁴ One may readily visualize him as the male painter portrayed in Ingres’ *Raphael and the Fornarina*, who physically embraces his model but gazes at his ideal representation of her on his canvas. As Poussin focuses on his artistic vision, Gilette is forgotten just like Frenhofer’s Saint Mary. She is reduced to a commodity, the precious

⁷¹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 225.

⁷² Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 231.

⁷³ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 232.

mirror that promises to aid the artist in arriving at his aesthetic vision. The young mistress' earlier complaint about Poussin looking at her without seeing her rings clear. In this scene, he gazes upon her, his sight reflected back upon himself and his aesthetic desires.

The subtitle of the first half of Balzac's text, so far discussed, is "Gilette." It is as if the author provides the reader with a literary painting. On the surface of the pages, Gilette is hardly seen, appearing only in the aforementioned closing scene with Poussin. She is literally like the Saint Mary of Frenhofer's painting. She is described with saintly images: "Gilette's lips filled the garret with golden light, and rivaled the brightness of the sun in heaven."⁷⁵ In addition, like the Saint Mary, Gilette's body is prostituted so that the male artist may embark on his artistic vision of attaining reflexive-reciprocity. She is sacrificed to the artist's glory; She "almost forgave him [Poussin] for sacrificing her to his art and his glorious future."⁷⁶ In this first section, when we view this tableau of Gilette, our attention is continually redirected from her, to the artist's powerful presence and perspective.

The Female Presence and Perspective

In *Art and the Committed Eye*, Richard Leppert examines the male gaze in art with a perspective different from those of Laura Mulvey and John Berger. He criticizes them as being "essentialist" since they rely on "a vast simplification alike of both female and male identity and subjectivity." He remarks that the male's voyeuristic gaze does not

⁷⁴ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 230.

⁷⁵ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 228.

⁷⁶ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 235.

simply establish male domination and female oppression. He indicates that the fact the male gaze is frequently directed at the female, reveals man's dependency on women to fulfill his desires.⁷⁷ Following Leppert's commentary, one may cite two supporting examples in *The Masterpiece*. For instance, Poussin needs Gilette to pose for Frenhofer in order to make his own gaze more knowledgeable, and Frenhofer needs to see Gilette in order to complete his painting.

Contrary to Leppert's assertions, however, the male artist's need of the female does not disempower the man and empower the woman so simply. As long as the male subverts his need of woman, the value of woman goes unrecognized within the work. A fine example of this is Frenhofer's need to compare his creation to a beautiful woman not to create her, but to confirm that his creation is indeed superior. As Borel indicates, the artist "turns regularly to reality to find the best subjects, sensing all the while that no living model will ever correspond exactly to his mental images."⁷⁸ When Frenhofer agrees to let Gilette pose, he is convinced of "the triumph of the beauty of his own creation, over the beauty of the living girl."⁷⁹ His self-confidence reduces the model's existence while bolstering the superiority of the artist's creation. Given that Frenhofer considers his creation to be part of himself, he additionally suggests that the male artist assumes himself superior to the female model, and thus further belittles the female's significance.

Rather than noticing the artist's dependency upon the female, the reader more readily acknowledges his interaction with the gaze of other males. This is evident when Frenhofer hesitates about whether or not to accept Poussin's exchange. Porbus asks him:

⁷⁷ Richard Leppert, *Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996) 211-215.

⁷⁸ Borel 14.

“Is it not woman for woman?”⁸⁰ For Frenhofer, however, his painted woman is far from being “a mistress who will be false” to her lover like Gillette is. He is flabbergasted by the idea of having to reveal his creation, himself, to the critical eye of another artist. He asks Porbus: “Would you have me cease at once to be father, lover, and creator?”⁸¹ By unveiling himself to the male gaze, he faces the possibility of demolishing the illusion of this holy trinity he has constructed around him. This also shows that only men are equal to men.

Frenhofer’s vision and the aura surrounding him are indeed shattered when he sees his work through the mirror of two other artists. When Poussin and Porbus examine the completed *Belle Noiseuse*, they are puzzled and disappointed by the chaotic melange of colorful brushstrokes broken only by a single foot in the corner. Poussin comments: “I see nothing.”⁸² Frenhofer is devastated when he discovers they do not witness the miracle he does. Through the gaze of his companions, Frenhofer begins to doubt his own vision and to view himself as “nothing.” The following day, he is found dead, all of his paintings burned, the critical gaze of fellow artists having led the illuminated and animated painter to reduce his existence to dark ashes. His tragic suicide and sacrifice of his work enforce the intensity of the male artist’s perspective.

The closing scene in which Poussin and Porbus reject Frenhofer’s painting highlight the male artist’s manipulative manner. When Poussin and Porbus look into the *Belle Noiseuse* and see “nothing” reflected back at them, they subvert the fact that “nothing” is indeed something. The 19th-century French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure,

⁷⁹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 235.

⁸⁰ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 233.

⁸¹ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 232.

reveals how language is a system of arbitrary signs. These signs, or words, find their meaning in relation to other words, especially by means of binary opposition.⁸³

“Nothing,” defined in opposition to “everything,” by necessity implies that it means something. Poussin and Porbus witness an example of the artist’s inability to create a real being from himself and to contain it within the artist’s frame. They do not acknowledge this inability, because they would have to see its possibility in themselves. Instead, they define Frenhofer as crazy and situate him exterior to the structure of painting. By doing this, they maintain the authority and superiority of their domain.

In this second half of the text, entitled “Catherine Lescault,” it is Frenhofer’s failure to render Catherine Lescault life-like that results in Porbus and Poussin’s rejection of him and his subsequent self-demise. The single painted foot in the corner of the *Belle Noiseuse* seems to defiantly break out of the painter’s frame. I offer that this Belle Noiseuse is Gilette. At the end of the story, Gilette, like the foot in the canvas’ corner, is described as “Crouching forgotten in the corner.”⁸⁴ She emerges from the atelier where she has been situated to be gazed at and painted, and scornfully says to Poussin: “I must be a vile thing if I love you still, for I despise you. . . I admire you, and I loathe you! I love you, and I feel that I hate you even now.” Her harsh words “sounded in Poussin’s ears,”⁸⁵ force him to set aside his vision and listen. The note of contradiction in Gilette’s tone mimics her contradictory role in the text. In the beginning she is an inspiring body

⁸² Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 237.

⁸³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 41-44.

⁸⁴ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 239

⁸⁵ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* 239.

whom the artist's gaze embraces. In the end, this same body is the Belle Noiseuse who escapes the painter's gaze and incites his demise.

From a contemporary feminist perspective, this chapter has peered into *The Unknown Masterpiece*. It has not assumed the dominant male gaze and joined the male characters in looking at the female. On the contrary, it has looked from the other side of the mirror out at the male characters. From this perspective, it has unveiled the dominance of the male presence and perspective within the text. It has shown how the male artist manipulates woman, transforming her into a mere reflection of his creative power. When he succeeds in subverting her significance in order to affirm himself, the female model appears saintly. When the artist fails to render her in the likeness of his authority and superiority, she is represented as the cause of his destruction.

Chapter Three: The Female Frame(d) in *Manette Salomon*

For the philosopher Kant, the frame surrounding a work of art functions to delineate the frame's interior, the representable and contained, from the uncontainable and nonrepresentable exterior. According to his *Third Critique*, the aesthetic interior should be intellectually valued as superior and separate from the physical or sublime realm of the exterior.⁸⁶ This dichotomy of intellectuality versus physicality influenced Kenneth Clark whom I mentioned in the introduction. Clark founds his discussion in "The Naked and the Nude" on a similar dichotomy in which the framed Nude is valued as a superior cultural creation while the naked body is frowned upon as an inferior, natural occurrence.⁸⁷

The French philosopher and theoretician, Jacques Derrida, unveils the paradoxical quality of Kant's reasoning in his book *La vérité en peinture*. He informs us that since terms like superior and inferior, representable and nonrepresentable, and aesthetic and sublime function as pairs of opposites, they are necessarily codependent for their individual meanings and therefore cannot be separated by something as arbitrary as a frame. David Carroll indicates that for Derrida, "the aesthetic, in as much as its frame can be argued to have a contradictory role—because it both separates the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic and opens the aesthetic up to what it is not—already contains the sublime

⁸⁶ David Carroll, *Paraesthetics* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 135-6.

⁸⁷ Clark 3-29.

‘within it’ in the form(lessness) of everything that cannot be contained or given form within its frame, starting with the frame itself.”⁸⁸ In other words, the aesthetic essentially contains the sublime by defining it as what is beyond its frame. For Derrida then, the frame is not a border indicating separation, but rather a porous space of confrontation.

In her book *The Female Nude*, contemporary feminist and art historian Lynda Nead applies Derrida’s revelations to provocatively argue that in traditional Nude art, the female body is the confrontational border which separates and links the aesthetic and the sublime, or what she terms the “obscene.” She comments that “the female nude marks both the internal limit of art and the external limit of obscenity. . . It is the internal structural link that holds art and obscenity together and an entire system of meaning together.”⁸⁹ The male artist achieves the aesthetic by transforming and containing the female body which is historically associated with the natural and sublime. Nead points out that “if art is defined as the conversion of matter into form, imagine how much greater the triumph for art if it is the female body that is thus transformed—pure nature transmuted, through the forms of art, into pure culture.”⁹⁰ Since this culture is dependent upon the frame of the female body, however, the artist’s achievement is self-contradictory. Through artistic representation, he convinces himself that he contains the female form, ignoring the fact that he considers the female to be beyond representation and beyond the frame of the aesthetic.

In the Goncourt brothers’ novel *Manette Salomon*, this paradoxical role of the female body is clearly evident. The story presents the rise and fall of a 19th -century fictive

⁸⁸ Carroll 142.

⁸⁹ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992) 25.

⁹⁰ Nead 18.

painter, Coriolis. His artistic inspiration and happiness at the beginning of the novel and the contrasting destruction of his career and identity at the end, are directly linked to his relationship with Manette Salomon, the model who becomes his mistress and eventually mother of his son and then his wife. This chapter will examine the evolution of their relationship through symbols of the frame, revealing the dual and contradictory role of the female protagonist's body. In the first half of the book, the painter's aesthetic desire frames his model. His artistic eye transforms her body into a voyeuristic object, his paints trap her image within canvas parameters, and his jealousy of an other's gaze shuts her within the arena of his home and studio. Contained by the artist in multiple ways, we have a positive presentation of Manette. As the artist's aesthetic passion to possess her becomes sexual, however, Coriolis finds himself overwhelmed by his mistress' body. Her pregnant womb suffocates his aesthetic gaze, her sexualized body absorbs his artistic vision and her control of the home entraps him. Uncontained by the artist, Manette is negatively portrayed as controlling him.

The painter's frames

In the opening pages of *Manette Salomon* a tender scene foreshadows the initial positive role Manette plays in Coriolis's life. One afternoon, an aging model approaches him and his companions at a studio. Gesturing towards her blond child she inquires if "any of you sirs would be in need of a little Jesus?"⁹¹ Coriolis embraces the little beauty who brushes against his pocket watch and makes it crash to the ground. He quickly

⁹¹ Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Manette Salomon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) 117. All quotations for this novel have been translated from the French by me with the aid of Richard Shryock.

assures the mother that it was an accident and “it is not her fault.”⁹² The watch is a prophesy that in time enough the two will meet again. Fifteen years later Coriolis meets the girl who has grown into a beautiful woman, neither aware that they have met before. Reflecting upon the text once this mystery is revealed much later on, it is intriguing to note how Manette symbolically appears as an angelic figure for Coriolis in the beginning of the story, as timeless as the painted images of Venus found in 19th-century painting. The first half of this chapter will analyze how as Coriolis religiously embraces Manette and frames her as a virgin-like and pure Madonna, she poses as his savior, the source of his renewed artistic success and happiness.

At first sight, Manette’s presence captivates Coriolis’s attention while his artistic gaze captures her being. During their first encounter on the omnibus in Paris, he automatically assumes the role of artist and studies Manette, the striking stranger seated across from him, as if she were his model. He regards her, describes her artistically as a sculpted object in “a little girl’s pose,”⁹³ having “gestures of a statue.”⁹⁴ Scrutinizing the young marble Venus across from him, Coriolis seems to sculpt her into a work of art through description. He eloquently remarks “in front of me her face is a completely black shadow, a true piece of obscurity.”⁹⁵ Like an artist carving a lithograph, Coriolis’s eye seems to tool a luminous outline of Manette from the shadowed surroundings.

When Coriolis sees Manette for the second time, having sought her out at a Jewish ball, the artist continues to capture her beneath his gaze. Julianna Starr asserts in “Men Looking at Women through Art,” that at the spectacle of the ball Manette becomes a

⁹² Goncourt 119.

⁹³ Goncourt 264.

⁹⁴ Goncourt 265.

spectacle in her own right.⁹⁶ Consulting the text we find strong evidence of this when Coriolis eyes Manette from afar. Like the lens of a camera, he zooms in on her arm, elbow and hand, fragmenting her body into mere parts. He eventually approaches his subject and asks her to pose for him. She accepts, pulling from her skirt a pocket watch. The reemergence of the image of a timepiece takes the reader back in time to their original encounter. Then, Manette broke Coriolis's watch into pieces. Now, it is ironically Coriolis who fragments Manette into pieces.

Time soon reveals how he takes Manette's broken body and reassembles it into a purely aesthetic object. In a scene of multiple gazes, the reader watches Manette examining Coriolis as he regards her and paints: "she sees herself looked at by the artist's eyes; she sees herself naked before the pencil, the palette, the *ébauchoir*, naked for the art of that almost sacred nudity."⁹⁷ Manette's naked body is positively portrayed as sacred, as the "Truth"⁹⁸ from which the artist creates his superior painted Nude. As Coriolis notes, "it is in the pose that the woman is no longer a woman, and that for her men are no longer men."⁹⁹ One could symbolically say that Manette's body, like that of the Virgin Mary who gave birth to Man's glory, is a passive receptacle that gives breath to the painter. As the framework for the Creator's creation, the model is essentially confined to the aesthetic vision and her personal identity diminished to almost nothing. After all, when he looks at her and when she looks at him looking at her, they each see little more than affirmation of his power to create.

⁹⁵ Goncourt 265.

⁹⁶ Starr 12.

⁹⁷ Goncourt 271.

⁹⁸ Goncourt 271.

⁹⁹ Goncourt 271.

Coriolis's framing gaze gains strength in his paintings where he envelopes Manette within canvas parameters as a looked at object. He takes her body, bends, stretches and conforms it to his liking as we see in the fine example of his *Turkish Bath*. The reader easily visualizes Manette as the subject of this oriental painting, stretched into "the pose of a bathing woman,"¹⁰⁰ "curled up and rounded into the line of a disk," "seated in the C of a crescent moon."¹⁰¹ This obviously alludes to the framed figures of the French artist Jean-Dominique Ingres's *Turkish Bath* from 1862. The rounded shape of his painting "takes on the aspect of a peephole, or perhaps a camera lens."¹⁰² Indeed, Coriolis peers at Manette, traps her within the rounded edge of his eye, and contains this sight within the edge of his canvas.

Coriolis's framing of Manette's body in this arched and tortuous pose on the interior of the painting's borders is mirrored on the exterior as well. For example, comparing the model to his Nude he reflects "I saw the reflection of my canvas upon her body."¹⁰³ He reduces Manette's identity to the reflection of his painted colors. The text further substantiates this when Manette examines the painting and appears "a woman who sees herself in a mirror."¹⁰⁴ Whether it be within the edges of a painting, the painter's eye or those of a metaphorical mirror, Manette's body is framed.

Overarching the powerful cases of the artist's gaze and painted canvases exist the architectural structures of the artist's atelier and home where Coriolis attempts to confine Manette's movements. After several painting sessions, his aesthetic eye becomes amorous

¹⁰⁰ Goncourt 275.

¹⁰¹ Goncourt 258.

¹⁰² Leppert 232.

¹⁰³ Goncourt 276.

¹⁰⁴ Goncourt 276.

and Manette more desirable. He asks that she pose for no other painters, work only in his studio, and move into his home as his mistress. Manette is hesitant to submit to his requests for they require her to give up her well-earned personal freedom. With hours of modeling, she has afforded to live on her own. One could argue that since she essentially buys her self sufficiency by selling her body to the artistic gaze, promising to sell her body to solely Coriolis would not compromise her freedom. Indeed it would not compromise but rather displace it entirely by requiring her to exchange her personal space for Coriolis's quarters. As the story reveals, when Manette consents, Coriolis pulls her from her "interior"¹⁰⁵ and frames her within the "beautiful cage"¹⁰⁶ of his studio and home. He appropriately calls his model's displacement and confinement to his domain as the "conquest of his mistress."¹⁰⁷ Here he confidently and powerfully holds "her life. . . beneath his hand, beneath his eyes."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Goncourt 287.

¹⁰⁶ Goncourt 283.

¹⁰⁷ Goncourt 286.

¹⁰⁸ Goncourt 286.

The painter framed

The gazing pupil, the hand cupping a brush, the canvas' edges, and the closed doors of studio and home all contain Manette. About mid way through the story, however, there is an abrupt change in Manette and Coriolis's relationship. This transformation is marked by a discovery which brings us back to the scene of the "little Jesus," Coriolis and the watch. Extremely jealous of Manette's continued practice of posing for other artists, Coriolis takes to spying on her affairs and happens upon a gold piece oddly familiar to him. When he questions Manette about it, she recounts the story of breaking a painter's watch in her youth. The sentimental realization of their past encounter leads Manette to submit to Coriolis's ultimate request of posing only for him. With this promise, she embraces him, "two arms around his neck."¹⁰⁹ From this moment forward, Manette's arms, which Coriolis had hitherto framed so well, now seem to inscribe continuous circles around him like the circles inscribed by the hands of a ticking clock. As time begins to tick, Coriolis blames Manette for all his woes. The negative portrayal of Manette as the encompassing cause of Coriolis's artistic ruin and unhappiness is the focus of the second half of this chapter.

Whereas Coriolis's artistic gaze captured Manette's body when he first saw her, now it is the model's body that captures the artist. When he decides to do a reproduction of his *Turkish Bath*, Coriolis no longer sees the beautiful reflection of his painted canvas on Manette's body, but rather her feminine form captivates his vision. He watches her: "She let fall on her from the pink point of her breast to the tip of her feet, upon the virginity of her figure, the drawing of her youth, the purity of her stomach, a gaze that

¹⁰⁹ Goncourt 300.

seemed to combine the love of a regretful woman and the pain of a statue crying for itself.”¹¹⁰ Manette is pregnant with his child. The beautiful statue whom he admired in the omnibus, the virgin structure after whom he modeled his Nudes, has come to life. He cannot consider this woman with a belly no longer hollow for his authority as his model. The image of the pregnant womb swallows his gaze and strangles the life out of his inspiration: “In becoming a mother, Manette had become another woman. The model had been killed suddenly, he was dead in her.”¹¹¹ His virgin-like muse has transformed into what Thérèse Dolan appropriately calls “Eve.”¹¹² Manette’s sexualized body seems to push the innocent male artist towards the fall of his career as a creator: “for him, paternity was detrimental to the artist, it diverted him from spiritual production, attached him to an inferior level of creation, lowered him to the bourgeois pride of carnal property.”¹¹³

Coriolis sublimates his dismay at having lost his model in a violent painting in which he represents and frames himself as a painted image. The picture portrays an aging man towering over a young naked girl sprawled on a bed. It is a furious scene overflowing with animosity and created with “lashes of a whip” and colors reminiscent of blood and fire.¹¹⁴ Julianna Starr refers to the work as an “allegorical representation” of Manette and Coriolis’s relationship. According to her, he “creates a painted man who has the privilege of gazing upon the untouched, virginal model that he desires—the one he lost, in his mind, when Manette became a mother.”¹¹⁵ Given this explication, one could

¹¹⁰ Goncourt 414.

¹¹¹ Goncourt 424.

¹¹² Dolan, Thérèse, “Musée Goncourt: Manette Salomon and the Nude,” *19th Century French Studies*, vol. 18 (1-2), 1989-90, 174.

¹¹³ Goncourt 227.

¹¹⁴ Goncourt 445.

¹¹⁵ Starr 13-14.

say that by projecting himself within the painting's borders, Coriolis has made himself into the object of an other's gaze with Manette. In so doing, he has traversed the boundary of the frame separating painter and painted model. Looking at the painting in this light, one views Manette indeed as the malevolent Eve who has tempted the male artist to cross the forbidden frontier of the frame. Her nakedness has enticed Coriolis's sexual desire and lured him into the canvas domain in which he had hitherto confined her. The aesthetic is overcome by the sublime.

In addition to being framed by his fixation with Manette's maternal womb and his entry into the painting's interior, Coriolis finds himself shrouded by the much larger structures of his home and studio. The two places in which he used to limit Manette's freedom, now confine him as she takes charge. She removes Coriolis's sentimental belongings from his bachelor travels and replaces them with Jewish curios. She also replaces his servants with her cousins and invites her ailing mother to live with them. As Coriolis loses sight of himself in this transformed environment, the reader is provided with an overwhelmingly negative vision of Manette. The beautiful Virgin from the first half of the book is now portrayed as a controlling Jewess. The home and studio become a battlefield where Coriolis is presented as a good Christian waging a losing war against a powerful Jew: "Jewish rapaciousness surreptitiously crept into the house, shrouded it within itself."¹¹⁶ The religious identity of the woman he once religiously embraced traps him. In her grip he loses his former identity, hardly going out in public and no longer receiving friends. As the text indicates "isolation surrounded Coriolis in Paris."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Goncourt 504.

¹¹⁷ Goncourt 507.

Within the frame of the house exists a chimney and it is in the nook of this burning space that Coriolis's career and existence burn to ashes. Furious with Manette, he sacrifices his paintings: "Coriolis seated himself in front of the stove, opened it, threw in a painting, and watched it burn."¹¹⁸ Returning to the previously mentioned notion that paintings affirm the power and existence of their creator, this act in essence symbolizes the destruction of the artist by his own hand. When Manette tries to stop him, to "hold his hands back," his reaction is to bring her into the fire of his fury: "he seized Manette's wrist. . . and still gripping her,"¹¹⁹ he led her to the chimney. Manette is like the match that ignites Coriolis's fury and he feels that his destruction is therefore her fault.

At the very end of the story when Coriolis links hands with Manette in marriage, his existence appears to be completely erased. Walking to the city hall on their wedding day, he is described as "a black silhouette."¹²⁰ Whereas Manette had been a shadowed figure when he first sighted her, now it is Coriolis who rests in the darkness. He descends into "the stairwell," reappearing briefly before disappearing forever: "then the couple turned right, disappeared."¹²¹ The ultimate frame of the wedding ring circles his finger, and like a watch ringing a wrist enslaves its wearer to the institution of time, Coriolis finds himself forever trapped by the institution of marriage.

In conclusion, let us return to Lynda Nead's comment that the female body is the porous frontier between the aesthetic and the sublime. The contradictory roles of Manette Salomon's body in the Goncourt brothers' novel seem to confirm this. Her body is the

¹¹⁸ Goncourt 515.

¹¹⁹ Goncourt 515.

¹²⁰ Goncourt 539.

framework the artist aesthetically frames, and it is the framework that draws him into the sublime. Her body thus proves the futile use of the artist's frame as a means of separating the aesthetic and the sublime. Though Manette's body seems to dismantle the artist's frame, it is ironically framed in the process. The text indicates that as long as Coriolis contains her body within the aesthetic's interior, she is good, and that whenever he is unable to contain her, she is bad. Her body is therefore limited to forever being caught between two extremes.

¹²¹ Goncourt 540.

Chapter 4: The Un/lucky Woman in *The Masterpiece*

“he persuaded himself that success or failure would depend entirely on his choice of a lucky or unlucky subject”¹²²

In the previous two chapters, I have applied the theoretical concepts of the gaze and the frame to Balzac and the Goncourt brother's texts in order to unveil the juxtaposed treatment of the female figures in each work. Both stories represent the female model as positive as long as the male artist succeeds in containing her body, whether with the powerful tool of his gaze or frame. When the male artist fails to situate the female form, it becomes problematic. The troublesome nature of the female body is well illustrated by Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. As I discussed in the introduction, the central female figures of these works were threatening to 19th-century spectators in that they challenged the authority of the male gaze and frame. It was specifically the sexuality of these contemporary nudes that proved to be so problematic. In treating one final novel, Émile Zola's *The Masterpiece*, I propose to address the troublesome nature of the female body in terms of its sexuality.

The Masterpiece recounts the story of a Parisian artist's struggle to create idealized images of women. Claude Lantier, the protagonist of the story, is frequently noted to be modeled after 19th-century figures, the painters Cézanne and Manet and the author himself. In the novel, the character of Christine Hallegrain, Claude's model and companion and then lover and wife, plays an essential role in his artistic plight. Christine

¹²² Émile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, trans. Thomas Walton (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1968) 213.

appears a pure and modest figure who ignites Claude's artistic passion and also a sexualized being who distracts the artist from his work and destroys him with her carnal passion. She proves to be the artist's lucky and unlucky subject.

The novel opens with a thunderstorm that brings Claude and Christine together for the first time. The painter returns home late one night to find a young and shivering woman in front of his residence. Christine finds herself helplessly there, having arrived late at the train station with no one to receive her and then having been dropped in the center of Paris by a cruel taxi driver. The two strangers end up passing the night together in Claude's one room studio. Despite their close proximity to one another, Christine and Claude maintain a rapport based on separation. The first portion of this chapter, will examine how as frontiers divide the bodies of these two characters, Christine inspires Claude's passion for his work, and as the borders are erased, her body reduces Claude's aesthetic desire to inferior sexual desire.

The most evident border separating Claude and Christine is composed of their individual characters. Claude, who "instinctively distrusted women,"¹²³ does not care to interact with Christine. When he first meets her, he immediately assumes that she is a lying prostitute out to fool him. He grudgingly brings her into his studio: "He began to feel sorry for her. After all, he had once taken pity on a stray dog on a night like this!"¹²⁴ Claude treats Christine as a burdensome animal. He is angered that her presence will force him to give up his bed, provide her with breakfast and forgo a productive morning of painting. Christine does not welcome Claude's presence either. She is reluctant to accept

¹²³ Zola 14.

his offer of shelter, nervous to be alone with him, and hesitant to remove her wet clothes and sleep in his bed.

In this opening scene, the wall Christine and Claude construct between themselves is illustrated by the metaphor of a dilapidated painter's screen. When they enter the studio, Claude arranges a screen in front of the bed. This make-shift wall delineates a space for each person through the obstruction of their gazes. The screen prohibits Claude from eyeing Christine's body, protecting him from being drawn into the interior of her space. It is almost as if she could be considered like the dangerous Olympia of Manet's tableau. Christine, an assumed prostitute, poses the possibility of enticing the spectator with her sexuality as she lounges naked on a bed. Mademoiselle Hallegrain, however, is a naïve young woman from Provence. She depends upon the painter's screen just as much as Claude. It promises to protect her through the concealment of her nakedness and to permit her to maintain a certain degree of modesty.

In the morning hours, the painter's screen is dismantled and an aesthetic one constructed in its place. Claude's curiosity leads him to peer behind the screen where Christine's "innocent nudity" that is "bathed in sunlight"¹²⁵ captures his attention. The sleeping beauty he spies upon, inspires him to paint:

In a moment he had snatched up his crayon-box and a big sheet of paper and, perching on the edge of a low chair, with a board across his knees, he began to draw. He looked profoundly happy. All his agitation, carnal curiosity and repressed desire gave way before the spellbound admiration of the artist with a keen eye for lovely colouring and well-formed muscles. The girl herself was already forgotten in the thrill of seeing how the snowy whiteness of her breasts lit up the delicate amber of her shoulders, and in the presence of nature in all its beauty he was overcome with such

¹²⁴ Zola 15.

¹²⁵ Zola 21.

apprehensive modesty that he felt like a small boy again, sitting to attention, being very good and respectful.¹²⁶

This description of Claude gazing at Christine stresses a preoccupation with the aesthetic. He examines her body in terms of line, color and shape, transforming it from that of a naked woman into an artistic object. In the process, the “trollop”¹²⁷ he took in out of pity, becomes an ideal model for his painting. The artist “saw her no longer as a woman but simply as a model.”¹²⁸ Through his artistic representation of her body, Claude literally frames Christine and establishes an aesthetic border between them.

When Christine awakens to find “a young man in shirt sleeves devouring her with his eyes,”¹²⁹ she is quick to reestablish her own barrier as well. She pulls the fallen sheet over her exposed body, covering all but her head which she permits Claude to continue sketching. When Christine departs, her clothes replace the sheet’s barrier: “For there was Christine pushing aside the screen and standing there all neat and tidy in her black, laced and buttoned and all done up in the twinkling of an eye.”¹³⁰ Danielle Kent treats Christine’s clothing as armour that protects her when worn, and permits her downfall when not.¹³¹ At this point in the story, Zola refers to Christine’s dress, stating that “fully clothed, she might have been wearing armour.”¹³² Here, Christine’s apparel functions as a shield that protects her modesty and creates a block between Claude’s body and her own.

Christine’s shield of modesty plays an essential role in determining Claude’s positive reception of her during subsequent months. As he recognizes her innocence and

¹²⁶ Zola 21-22.

¹²⁷ Zola 14.

¹²⁸ Zola 24.

¹²⁹ Zola 22.

¹³⁰ Zola 31.

¹³¹ Danielle Kent, “Zola’s Women: A Chink in the Armour,” *Excavatio* 8 (1996): 30-48.

prudery, indicated by clothes which mask her body's form, Claude begins to trust Christine. He informs her that she is a "real good sort. . . And believe me, it's the first time I've paid *that* compliment to a woman."¹³³ The artist grows to admire Christine's pure body as the perfect model for his painting. When she consents to model her head, he is delightfully inspired: "In two sittings the head was finished. Claude was delirious with joy. It was the best bit of painting he'd ever done."¹³⁴

Claude's desire to aesthetically represent Christine's pure form, and Christine's modest attempts to protect her virginity separate the two, yet eventually bring them together.

She felt as if he was undressing her with every look; the most innocent words began to resound with equivocal overtones; every handshake went a little further than the wrist and sent a thrill of emotion through the entire body. And the thing they had avoided in their friendship, the disturbing factor, the awakening of the male and female in them, was unleashed at last by the constant obsession of virgin nudity.¹³⁵

Claude asks Christine to pose nude for his work and she consents, undoing the screen of her clothing. Nevertheless, the modeling scene, is marked by their separate attempts to retain a chaste relationship. Christine silently poses, assuming the presence of a marble statue and thereby masking the shame of her naked body. Claude also subverts Christine's nakedness by idealizing her as a pure and "naked saint"¹³⁶ who has sacrificed herself for the artist's canvas. In focusing on the aesthetic, they both attempt to establish the painter's canvas as a screen to separate their bodies.

¹³² Zola 31.

¹³³ Zola 92.

¹³⁴ Zola 112.

¹³⁵ Zola 114.

¹³⁶ Zola 116.

Claude and Christine's attempts to guard a barrier between them are ultimately unsuccessful. Following the modeling session, Christine tries to reestablish her modest shield by rapidly dressing, wanting "to leave no portion of her skin uncovered."¹³⁷ She is so flustered, however, that she buttons her garments up all wrong. Claude is likewise in disarray: "shattered, heartbroken, unable to utter so much as a word of thanks, he planted a kiss on her brow."¹³⁸ The artist and model's reactions are marked by a sense of fragmentation. The screens separating them begin to blur, and the shared kiss marks the bringing of their two bodies together.

After this point in the story, the screen of the artist's canvas no longer functions to separate Claude and Christine, but rather to draw them together. Both artist and model identify with the painting, Claude because he has invested his artistic passion into it, and Christine because she recognizes her body in it. When the work is met with laughter at the Salon des Refusés, they both feel ridiculed and end up seeking condolence in each other. Ironically, it is in the wake of another storm, this one the Salon's "storm of laughter,"¹³⁹ that the two find themselves passing another night in Claude's studio. This storm erases the boundaries that marked the first night they stayed together. The story indicates: "They were both in love, and it seemed fitting that their love should be consummated there in the studio as part of the story of the picture that had gradually drawn them together. Night closed in around them, and they lay in each other's arms, weeping tears of joy in the first outpourings of their passion."¹⁴⁰ When Claude and

¹³⁷ Zola 116.

¹³⁸ Zola 116.

¹³⁹ Zola 140.

¹⁴⁰ Zola 141.

Christine consummate their relationship, they become part of the painted canvas, part of the screen-like canvas, within whose aesthetic plane the two are framed.

The work the model and artist become a part of is Claude's painting *Open Air*. This picture is very similar to Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Fig. 8). It portrays a countryside setting with a fully dressed man and reclining female nude in the foreground and two frolicking women in the distance. Soon after consummating their relationship, Claude and Christine actually move to the countryside. Their time at Bennecourt is initially marked by a sensation of "open air." The walls of modesty and painting that kept them apart are no longer present. The couple revels in the vast space and privacy the countryside provides, indulging in their newly found sexuality wherever they choose.

Christine seems to assume the role of Claude's sensual reclining nude in *Open Air*. During their first months at Bennecourt, her body transforms from that of a modest virgin into that of a passionate lover.

Ever since she had so heedlessly placed that first burning kiss upon his mouth the girl had given way to the woman, the lover had sprung to life in the virgin, . . . Now she was showing herself as she was meant to be, in spite of her long integrity, one of those physically, sensually passionate beings who are so profoundly disturbing once they are aroused from their dormant state of modesty.¹⁴¹

As Christine takes on the sensual nature of the painted nude, she seems to become just as disconcerting as the female figure in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Marie Lathers comments on how Christine's body becomes problematic as Claude's interest in it shifts from her head to her belly: "The move from head to *ventre* [belly] marks a move from the virginal, loved model to the corrupt professional model who is associated with the prostitute and

¹⁴¹ Zola 148.

thus with diseases centering on the *ventre*.”¹⁴² In the open air of Bennecourt, one sees how Christine’s sexualized body corrupts Claude’s artistic passion: “It was she who enveloped him in a searing flame that caused his artistic ambitions to shrivel up to nothing.”¹⁴³ Christine is depicted as stealing the artist’s virility so that he is no longer able to paint.

In the first half of *The Masterpiece*, I have analyzed how Christine transforms from an innocent woman into the problematic subject of Claude’s *Open Air*. The remainder of the text seems to parallel the first portion. Once again, Christine poses as the inspiring model who becomes the sensual woman of Claude’s art work.

Christine and Claude find themselves uncomfortably situated and separated in Paris all over again. In the small space of their studio and home, one notices Claude’s ill humor towards Christine. He finds her presence distracting and is annoyed at having to share his work space with her and their son. Claude seems to resume his distrust of Christine. In a scene reminiscent of their first meeting, he questions her moral character. One night at dinner, he suspects the reason he has no meat is that Christine has squandered the money away on herself, when in fact she has pawned her only nice dress in order to make his soup and potatoes.

Christine and Claude’s cohabitation is plagued by their separation. On their wedding night, an event which normally symbolizes the joining of two people, the couple’s

¹⁴² Marie Lathers, “Modeling, Mothering, and the Postpartum Belly in Zola’s *L’Oeuvre*,” *Esprit Créateur* 39 (1999): 36.

¹⁴³ Zola 148.

separation is confirmed. Christine and Claude “knew, as they released their hold upon each other and lay side by side again, that from that moment they were strangers.”¹⁴⁴ From this point forward, the couple’s physical relations diminish to the point that “they had gradually sundered all carnal bonds through the self-imposed chastity which, in theory, was to enable him to put all his virility into his painting.”¹⁴⁵ The painter distances himself from Christine in order to ensure his aesthetic productivity.

Like the old painter’s screen separated Christine and Claude their first night together, now a symbolic screen separates them on their first night as man and wife. The text indicates that “there was some obstacle between them, another body whose icy breath had touched them more than once even in the passionate early stages of their love.”¹⁴⁶ The other body is that of a painted woman Claude is continually trying to perfect: “Between them stood the enormous canvas, like a great surmountable wall.”¹⁴⁷ This canvas, like the painter’s screen, is representative of the artist’s efforts to use the aesthetic as a barrier to Christine’s body.

Just as Claude once peered behind the painter’s screen to gaze at Christine, he does the same now. His wife is the model for the painted figure of his new work. Unlike during her youth, Christine now willingly sheds her clothes for the artist’s scrutiny, all in an attempt to regain her forlorn lover. The painter, however, takes care to only gaze at his living subject from an aesthetic perspective. The text notes that “Claude soon began to take her for granted and to treat her merely as a model . . . She was reduced to being

¹⁴⁴ Zola 232.

¹⁴⁵ Zola 345.

¹⁴⁶ Zola 232.

¹⁴⁷ Zola 247.

nothing more nor less than a kind of human lay figure.”¹⁴⁸ He establishes a model/artist rapport between them, heightening the sense of separation.

Christine gives her body up entirely to Claude’s artistic plight, and in a round about way she becomes his inspiration. In one posing session, it is described that “the reclining woman in the old picture was reincarnated in the upright figure in the new one.”¹⁴⁹ Christine’s body, in the form of Claude’s original representation of it in *Open Air*, encourages him to paint and to perfect his painted woman. The nude he obsesses over, Christine’s double, assumes a privileged place in Claude’s life. She becomes an illuminated “female figure like an image on an altar.”¹⁵⁰

The painted woman of *Open Air* reemerges in Claude’s new work to be just as idealized and problematic as the original. Claude’s new painting represents the heart of Paris, the Seine and a prominent nude woman. The nude is represented as a glorified religious icon and simultaneously as a disturbing sensual woman.

Who could have made her of marble and gold and precious stones and shown the mystic rose of her sex blooming between the precious columns that were her thighs, beneath the sacred canopy of her belly? Could he himself have unconsciously produced this symbol of insatiable desire, this extra-human image of the flesh turned to gold and jewels in his hands as he strove in vain to bring his work to life?¹⁵¹

As the artist struggles to render the woman life-like, her body threatens to lead him to his downfall with its sexuality: “The naked Woman, now as always the desire and torment of

¹⁴⁸ Zola 243.

¹⁴⁹ Zola 258.

¹⁵⁰ Zola 351.

¹⁵¹ Zola 351.

his working hours, the flesh that would turn his brain and encompass his destruction the day he tried to bring it to life.”¹⁵²

Christine seems to traverse the frame of the aesthetic and become the sensual woman of Claude’s painting. The images used to describe her body at the end of the story are very similar to those that refer to the painted woman: “As she stood in the pale candlelight, she looked radiant with youth. . . her legs looked stronger and finer as they swept up to the broader, silky curve of her hips, and her breasts stood firm and erect, as they throbbed with the pulse of her desire.”¹⁵³ Christine possesses the youth, strength and richness of Claude’s nude. She also beholds her sensuality. The text indicates that she is “passion unbridled and devastating, freed from all the chaste reserve she had used to show; passion burning to say everything and do everything, intent on conquest.”¹⁵⁴ The silent and passive model forces the artist to take notice of her body.

Christine’s sexualized body overcomes the artist as it did in the first half of the text. In a fury she rips off her clothes, obliging the artist to recognize her desire. She quickly lures Claude into partaking in her passion. After months of chastity their two bodies are brought together in a tender scene reminiscent of their first love affair. As before, Claude loses himself to Christine’s body: “This time he was conquered.”¹⁵⁵ He promises to forever give up painting and thus his identity as an artist, all at the bequest of his lover.

In the end, Claude is completely absorbed by Christine’s sexuality. After succumbing to her desire, he hangs himself in front of her painted form. It seems fitting

¹⁵² Zola 346.

¹⁵³ Zola 352.

¹⁵⁴ Zola 352.

that his lifeless face hangs directly in front of the woman's flower-like sex: "His face was turned towards the picture and quite close to the Woman whose sex blossomed as a mystic rose, as if his soul had passed into her with his last dying breath, and he was still gazing on her with his fixed and lifeless eyes."¹⁵⁶ The natural desire of his subject is portrayed as having devoured him.

Christine is the un/lucky woman in *The Masterpiece*. Within Zola's literary work, she is represented as the lucky model who inspires the artist to paint. She also appears as the unlucky woman who causes his artistic destruction. When examining the aesthetic masterpieces within Zola's literary masterpiece, one witnesses how Christine is construed as the lucky virgin-like subject of his paintings and also as the unlucky sensual subject. She transforms from being a piece of Claude's masterpieces, to being the master of his work.

¹⁵⁵ Zola 354.

¹⁵⁶ Zola 356.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Although the works studied in this thesis span over half of the 19th century, Balzac, the Goncourt brothers and Zola all present a consistent representation of the male artist's idealization of the female body. In Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Gilette's youth, innocence and beauty are valued, and she is glorified as a saintly being when she sacrifices herself to the artist's plight. In the Goncourt brothers' novel, Manette Salomon poses as a savior who renews Coriolis's artistic success. Finally, in Zola's *The Masterpiece*, Claude admires Christine's virgin-like form, and describes her as a saint when she sets aside her modesty to pose for him. The models in each of these works are depicted as giving their bodies to the male artists' artistic struggles to represent ideal female beauty, and they themselves are represented in ideal terms as self-sacrificing, inspirational and pure.

The glorification of the models in these novels coincides with the painters' ability to contain and perfect the representation of the female body on their canvases. As Kenneth Clark asserts, the male artist's goal is to transform the model's naked body into an aesthetic nude representative of his concept of ideal beauty.¹⁵⁷ Gilette, Manette and Christine's bodies are all seen as the naked matter that the painters hope to shape with genius, create their masterpieces and find their success. Gilette holds the promise of aiding Frenhofer in his completion of his depiction of Catherine Lescault, Coriolis transforms Manette's body into the oriental beauty of his *Turkish Bath*, and Claude needs

Christine in order to finish his revolutionary *Open Air* and *Ile de la Cité*. Drawing on Irigaray's theory that man reduces woman's body to being a receptacle to hold his superior being,¹⁵⁸ one may offer that the model's body serves as a receptacle for the artist's superior aesthetic creation. This phenomenon is clearly seen in all three texts. Moreover, when the artists use their models in this manner, they do so in accordance with the way 19th-century patriarchal society situated the female as a reproducer within the sphere of the familial. Just as this worked to affirm the male's authority, the artist contains the model's body within the boundaries of the canvas and employs it to confirm his authority and superiority.

Within each text, the male artists depicted assert their significance by stripping the model of her autonomy and transforming her into the nude which they deem to be an extension or reflection of themselves. When analyzing *The Unknown Masterpiece*, I coin the term reflexive-reciprocity to describe this phenomenon. I cite how Frenhofer strives to create a woman who is so ideal and real, she will come to life and confirm his omnipotence. In *Manette Salomon* and *The Masterpiece*, one may note how the male artists similarly attempt to occult their models' identities as a means of asserting their own. This is revealed as the artists, who are so engrossed with their creations, fail to see the reality of their models. For example, when Coriolis paints *Manette*, he does not see her but the reflection of his canvas on her body. Likewise, Claude forgets *Christine* as he focuses on his painted representations of her. In each instance the male artist appears to treat the female model as Irigaray indicates man treats woman: he transforms her body

¹⁵⁷ Kenneth Clark 3-29.

¹⁵⁸ Irigaray 66.

into “a glass for the ‘subject’ to gaze upon himself and reproduce himself in his reflection.”¹⁵⁹

When Frenhofer, Coriolis and Claude fail to contain their models within the boundaries of their canvases and employ their bodies as a means of reflecting their power, the female body assumes a destructive character. In each novel, it appears as if the female body overtakes the artist’s aesthetic frame with its desirability and sexuality. It is as if the sublime, which Kant and Clark place as being outside of the frame, infiltrates the interior of the frame. There is an erasure of the canvas’ border. More importantly, the female body is established as a containing frame in its own right. The artists are depicted as being drawn into and destroyed by the female’s body. Frenhofer’s *Belle Noiseuse*, with its defiant foot symbolically kicking out of the canvas’ corner, leads the artist to commit suicide and burn his paintings. Coriolis becomes Manette’s lover and is seen as seduced by her body, represented in the seductive naked girl he portrays in one last work. Like Frenhofer, Coriolis’s life also ends prematurely and he destroys his work. He is portrayed as strangled by the wedding band that shackles him to Manette, and he burns his work out of spite for her. Claude ultimately hangs himself in front of the flowering sex of Christine’s painted image, and his work is burned following his death. In each scenario, it is the female body that is represented as the source of the male artist’s demise.

The juxtaposition between the female model as benevolent whilst she is contained and malevolent when she is not, reveals the threat her body poses to the male artist. As Irigaray asserts, man’s fear of woman’s sexual difference fosters his attempts to contain

¹⁵⁹ Irigaray 64.

her body and transform it into something that affirms his authority.¹⁶⁰ This fear inhabits the male artists in all three works, as is revealed in their efforts to transform the naked into the nude. The artist's fear of the model's sexualized body is further established through his difficulty of accepting that he cannot contain the female body, or what Irigaray terms the "volume without contours."¹⁶¹ In addition, the depiction of the models' sexualized bodies as being the source of the artists' destruction confirms the threat she poses.

Following a contemporary feminist perspective, one may read the novels and establish the authority of the female models within them. It is essential to note, however, that no matter how many aesthetic frames the models challenge, there is always an even more insurmountable framework from which the models may never be freed: language. Gillette, Manette and Christine are confined to the novel's representations and definitions of them as being either good or evil, contained or uncontainable, inspirational or destructive, or the "virgin/whore polarity" as described by Griselda Pollock.¹⁶² These dichotomous terms embrace and exclude the female characters, containing them in each instance. Clément illustrates in the story of the Tarantula that the woman who succumbs to the patriarchal order is contained by it, and that the woman who challenges the patriarchal order is also contained by it through the order's rejection of her.¹⁶³ In the novels, the female characters are similarly paradoxically contained. The juxtaposed representation of the female models frames them in another manner as well. Gillette, Manette and Christine are all defined and represented in relationship to their rapport with the male artists. It is the male artist's success or failure to contain his model's sexuality

¹⁶⁰ Irigaray 64

¹⁶¹ Irigaray 53.

¹⁶² Pollock 78.

that determines the story's depiction of her. In the Beauvoirian sense, these female characters are subordinated in that they are sexually situated in terms of their relationship to the male characters.

In addition to the dichotomous representations of the models, another more curious manner of maintaining a sense of patriarchal order is established within the text. I propose that this order is affirmed through the destruction of the male artists as they fail to contain their models' nakedness in order to create their idealized nudes. In each novel, the male protagonists die or suffer a symbolic death at their own hand. The male artists' self-destruction highlights the ultimate authority of the male. He removes himself from the patriarchal order, ridding it of confirmation of the artist's inability to contain the female body. Additionally, their paintings, which attest to this inability, are also destroyed either by the artist or another man.

The destruction of the male artist further suggests the threat of the female model that I mentioned earlier. Her body's authority must be controlled even if it requires the sacrifice of the male artist and his work. Nevertheless, the female's force still goes unrecognized within the text, and it is even contained. Given that the model is represented only in relationship to the artist, his destruction results in her narrative death. In each text, the female model is removed from the literary work once the artist dies. This removal confirms that their existence was dependent entirely upon the living artist.

Through the analysis of the dichotomous representations of the female models in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, *Manette Salomon* and *The Masterpiece*, this thesis hopes to

¹⁶³ Clément 19-22.

have revealed the oppression of these fictive characters within the texts. Language functions to oppress these depicted models by defining them as the known and the unknown, the framed and the frame, and the lucky and the unlucky. Furthermore, these definitions are assigned according to the models' relationships to the male characters, depending specifically on the artists' ability to contain and transform the naked female form into a nude reflecting male authority. Though these novels are all works of fiction, they may be examined as a reflection of the dominant ways of subordinating women in 19th-century France. After all, the representations of the characters within them are formed by the presence and perspective of the authors who are rooted in the symbolic order of their time. My analysis of these texts may therefore contribute to the quest for better understanding the historical treatment of women in patriarchal culture. According to Clément, it is by acquiring this historical knowledge, by illuminating the mechanics of patriarchal control over women, that one may better comprehend the current situation of women and improve upon it: "in telling it, in developing it, even in plotting it, I seek to undo it, to overturn it, to reveal it, to expose it."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Clément 6.

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