

# Exploitation of Women in the Nineteenth-Century French Department Store: Labor, Advertisements, and Surveillance in Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the exploitation of women, which became increasingly prevalent with the rise of newer models of commerce and the introduction of department stores in society. Émile Zola's 1883 novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, focuses on key themes of capitalism, the mistreatment of lower-class workers, and the inherent sexism women faced in nineteenth-century France. By focusing on the new modes of retail shopping that emerged in the late 1800s, Zola highlights the problems created by a consumer-focused society. The introduction of women into the job market created more barriers for them to overcome, as women were no longer just competing with men in the workplace, but were also directly competing with each other due to low base salaries and commission-based bonuses. However, a theme that has not been analyzed by scholars of Zola is the prominence of surveillance as a theme in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Department store owners crafted brand-new advertising campaigns specifically targeting women. The use of male workers to deter shoplifting, along with the avoidance of police intervention when faced with thefts, presents a new argument: that women are exploited not only for their labor but also for their money as consumers. This analysis highlights how that the development of modern commerce and capitalism furthered the harm that women faced as both workers and consumers.

**KEYWORDS:** Exploitation of women, capitalism, department store, Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, surveillance, nineteenth-century Paris

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In his 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (The Ladies' Delight), French author Émile Zola (1840-1902) demonstrates the complex intersectionality among sexism, social hierarchies, capitalism, and the working class in his portrayal of a nineteenth-century Parisian department store. This exposition on the rise of modern commerce and a free market reveals the systemic problems that all capitalistic societies face: the mistreatment of the working class and further harm to marginalized communities. "The Ladies' Delight"—the fictional department store featured in Zola's novel—gives a glimpse into the organization of the class system that develops alongside the rise of consumerism and open markets. The poor and working class are forced to compete in sales to earn a meager living, whilst the rich command those below them and make far more while doing far less hard labor. Some of the most prominent themes in Zola's novel include class injustices, the abuse of workers, and the exploitation of women consumers and sales ladies. There have been a multitude of studies focused on analyzing the prominent themes in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, but there is an insight that scholars have not deeply engaged with: the use of surveillance to deter shoplifting and how it explicitly harms women.<sup>1</sup> Zola intricately develops a society within a society through his depiction of the department store, highlighting the mistreatment of workers and the store management's own "laws" as surveillance over women shoppers. This prompts the research question: How does Zola's depiction of modern commerce demonstrate that the rise of capitalism and consumer society leads to the exploitation of women? After examining the novel's portrayal of the abuse of saleswomen and the manipulation of female consumers, this paper concludes with a new insight not recognized in previous scholarship: the store's treatment of shoplifting represents another facet of exploitation of female shoppers.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a literature review of existing interdisciplinary scholarship and a close textual analysis of Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. The articles used include Susie Hennessy's analysis of desire and consumption

in Zola's 1883 work, McBride's explanation of the gendered history of the department store in relation to the exploitation of laborers, and Fullerton and Punj's in-depth study of the history of kleptomania and marketing in nineteenth-century Paris department stores. In conjunction with these articles, a comparison to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is utilized to understand the surveillance tactics described by Zola in his novel. These resources combined with a literary critique of *Au Bonheur des Dames* will be used to understand how women were exploited by capitalism and the development of modern commerce. To support this paper's claims, close textual reading of Zola's novel will be performed on several passages from the novel, including those that focus on the protagonist, Denise Baudu; the labor conditions of shopgirls; descriptions of the price wars waged between department store owner Octave Mouret and small shop owner Robineau; and case studies of two bourgeois women clients, Madame Marty and Madame de Boves.

This paper also delves into the intricacies of exploitation of women and consumer manipulation. As described by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "exploitation" is the use of an individual's perceived weakness or vulnerability to benefit oneself. In the case of female laborers and women as consumers, exploitation would mean using their perceived weaknesses and vulnerabilities as a disadvantaged group to increase profits in a capitalistic society. The understanding of consumer manipulation as a concept can be complex, which is why this paper focuses on it as a facet of the larger exploitative structures used to further harm women. As Janis Witte defines it in her paper, "consumer manipulation" can occur through the limitation of autonomy and "the feeling of being tricked" (2). Lastly, a definition of surveillance is necessary as the literature on it in relation to Émile Zola is lacking. Foucault's analysis on the topic explains that surveillance is a method of social control that results in social conformity and self-discipline due to the threat of persistent observation.

1). See Susie Hennessy's analysis on consumption and desire in female shoppers and Theresa M. McBride's examination of women as salesclerks in the department store.

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## BACKGROUND

Émile Zola is widely known for being the creator of the naturalist movement in literature. Naturalism was inspired by the rise of rigorous scientific methods in this period and, as a literary movement, it sought to provide realistic depictions of life through observations. Zola's main literary work was the twenty-volume *Les Rougon-Macquart* series, of which *Au Bonheur des Dames* is the eleventh novel. The series explores common "social ills" and taboo topics such as alcoholism and criminality. *Au Bonheur des Dames* records the rise of the first Parisian department store and anticipates capitalism and modern commerce as we see them today.

Traditionalism vs. modernity is a common theme in Zola's works. He explores this concept by setting "The Ladies' Delight" department store in vicious competition with family-owned businesses. As the story progresses, the availability of a wide variety of mass-produced commodities, such as clothing, fabrics, and home goods, sold at incredibly low prices forced all other niche businesses that had existed for decades to shut down as they cannot compete with modern businesses tactics. Octave Mouret, the owner of the department store, creates a world of luxury that explicitly targets women with advertising and displays to generate massive profits. Zola uses Mouret and other male characters in his novel to expose misogynistic and sexist views—for instance, the belief that women are unable to control themselves as consumers—that reflected dominant attitudes in nineteenth-century France. Moreover, it is not just men's view of women that inherently perpetuates this patriarchal system in the department store, it is also the capitalistic competition that Mouret creates to foster higher sales. This is where Zola introduces the concept of incentive compensation to workers' average base salary wages, building a new form of competition among salespeople into the system that most businesses used at the time.

## EXPLOITATION OF LABORERS

The impact of capitalism and modernity on the average worker is a significant and recurring theme in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. The first department Zola introduces in "The Ladies' Delight" is ladies' wear, where the main character, Denise,

is given her first job in Paris. Denise is forced to wear a silk dress that is two sizes too big, and she can only afford uncomfortable work shoes that leave her feet in blisters. At the end of each day, she comes back to her room at the top of the store "haggard with tiredness" and sobbing to herself (Zola 115, 117). Zola perfectly depicts problems with modern commerce that were not seen as much with traditional family businesses. The working class is exploited, forced to brutalize their bodies and their minds to benefit the top 1%, while barely making a living wage for themselves. Denise yearns to make enough money to aid her two little brothers but has to deal with low sales, cruel coworkers, and other brutalities that retail workers must face.

Furthermore, despite dealing with physically painful work conditions, Denise is also made to deal with the competition between herself and the other women who work in ladies' wear: Marguerite and Clara. These two women berate, tease, and mentally torture Denise in the workplace, all of it witnessed by Madame Aurélie, the head of the ladies' wear department. Why are some of the few women with the opportunity to work for their families and earn a wage fighting within their own group? Zola utilizes Marguerite and Clara to expose the complexities that arise from commission-based sales. Denise is a vulnerable newcomer to the store, and, as Zola demonstrates, it is easier for the other saleswomen to pick on her and force her to lose out on sales than to compete with each other. The first meeting among the three young women is when both Marguerite and Clara are rushing and pushing past each other to be the first to arrive in ladies' wear for the day (Zola 88). A similar phenomenon occurred in nineteenth-century France, as McBride notes, "if the debutant could withstand the... often heavy-handed surveillance of other salesclerks, she had a chance to enter the ranks of the relatively well-paid saleswomen" (667-668). Thus, the first to arrive would get the first customer and, therefore, had a better chance of getting more sales and earning more money for herself. Exploiting women to create more competition and generate more profit for the "machine" (28), as Zola describes Mouret's department store, is exactly what modern capitalism does. The popularization of commission-based wages is seen in *Au Bonheur des Dames*; the more sales the women get the more money they earn and the faster they can climb the social hierarchy ladder to success. What both Denise and her

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coworkers go through are key examples of the exploitation of the working class and the exploitation of women workers due to capitalism and modern commerce.

In addition, the discrepancy in treatment of men and women during hiring and firing at the department store adds another layer of sexism to the social hierarchy. During the summer “off” season a lot of the seasonal employees, and employees that do not bring in enough sales, are fired. This disproportionately affects the women workers as they have enough trouble and hardships attempting to find a job at the department store, and are then out of luck attempting to find a job anywhere else (Zola 54-57). Most of the men who end up fired can work elsewhere in construction, or other “masculine” blue-collar jobs, whilst women are underrepresented and are unable to work in those fields due to sexist ideologies. After exploiting them during the rush of holiday seasons, Zola shows that Mouret will simply fire them with no regard for their well-being.

We can see a specific example of this when Denise is wrongfully terminated from her position in ladies’ wear (Zola 174). Although the female workers all share a living space on the upper floors of the store, those who are fired are immediately removed from the premises and forced to find a new place to live. There are no safeguards or alternative structures to aid a young woman in getting back on her feet after losing her (barely) livable wage job. In contrast, Deloche, a male worker in the lace department, is permitted to sleep under a desk on a cot rather than out on the streets alone at night (Zola 148). By highlighting gendered differences in the experiences of Denise and Deloche, Zola exposes the contradictions in the treatment of men and women workers in nineteenth-century France.

Throughout the novel, Zola uses metaphors to describe “The Ladies’ Delight” as representing a factory floor and being machine-like in its operations. He emphasizes the almost clockwork opening and closing of the store and how each worker plays a part in either buying, selling, or checking out customers. Rather than viewing his workers, especially his female workers as individuals with needs, Mouret treats them like cogs in a machine. Once one worker no longer provides use, in this case, sales, they are destroyed and removed from the machine so that they will not harm the

store’s profits. These ideologies became commonplace in the 1840s to 1860s, as the main use of salespeople was as gears churning in the machine by letting goods “sell themselves” with flashy displays (McBride 665).

## EXPLOITATION OF CONSUMERS

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### Case Study 1: Madame Marty

However, it is not only female workers who face the issues that arise from capitalism and modern commerce. Another facet of economics and politics is advertising, which explicitly targets female consumers. Mouret’s business techniques are crafted perfectly by Zola to show not only Mouret’s genius for business, but also his internal biases that lead him to specifically prey upon female consumers. An example of this would be Madame Marty, one of the main shoppers in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Zola describes Madame Marty as “A thin woman... ugly, ravaged by smallpox...” who is “unable to resist temptation” of department store goods (Zola 61). She spends all of her husband’s small salary under the influence of advertising due to the pressure of a variety of sales and deals. Zola utilizes Mouret to demonstrate corporate greed and the idea that the rich do not care about the lower class, even if they claim otherwise. Mouret spends thousands of francs on advertising each year and promotes incredibly low deals on a few items to manipulate women consumers into believing that every item they purchase is a “steal.”

Madame Marty is portrayed as a woman who always gives into her vices, and she desperately works to hide her purchases from her husband. She understands that her family does not have much money, and she does not work, but she is still described as a woman shopper who cannot resist purchasing the goods that Mouret advertises via displays and personally to her. This idea is furthered in Susie Hennessy’s article on consumption in the novel, as she explores the complexities of “identities for sale” that Zola presents. She explains how Mouret’s window displays represent what the female consumers can become: “Their headless-ness reinforces the adaptability of this idealized image” (Hennessy 699). Women shoppers are encouraged to visualize themselves as the highly sexualized and objectified headless mannequins, like the ones that the department store

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uses in its displays. In addition, Madame Marty is one of Zola's ways of critiquing (or perpetuating) the stereotype that women love to shop and are not capable of ignoring those "temptations." He uses words such as "ugly," as compared to some of the other female shoppers, and "ravaged by smallpox" to represent her physical characteristics and her powerlessness against temptation as an illness.

Another scene in which Zola illuminates modern business practices that are supportive of the manipulation of consumers is the sales war between Mouret and Robineau. The latter was previously an underling of Mouret's who creates his own small business to compete with the department store. After Robineau loses his main source of income due to unfair layoffs, he spends his wife's fortune to craft his own business to compete with the monopoly the new department store has created. Unfortunately, small businesses are not profitable enough to sell large quantities of a variety of products at extremely low prices. "The Ladies' Delight," however, can do just that. Robineau creates a beautiful silk fabric that he intends to sell at a lower price than that offered initially at the department store. Mouret then lowers the prices of his fabrics and advertises them in the newspapers to bring back his female customers, causing Robineau to respond and lower his prices yet again. The cycle continues until it is obvious that both stores are losing significant profit just to keep and attract customers, which inevitably leads to Robineau's business losing (Zola 193-94).

Competition between traditional and modern businesses is not the only theme that Zola attempts to highlight in this interaction. Zola also points out the middlemen (or women) in this situation, which are the women customers buying the rare silks. The advertising argument between the two egocentric men becomes a fight over their customers. Both Robineau and Mouret lower their typical prices to unprofitable numbers just to garner more sales and customers. Women are at the forefront of their minds, but the shop owners do not realize it. The women become numbers and statistics due to corporate greed. This section of the novel also demonstrates the effects the new commerce has on family-owned businesses, as they are forced to bow down to the prices and strategies of the "top dogs" to even stand a chance of keeping their livelihoods. In the novel, traditional family businesses find themselves giving

up their ethics, morals, and even customer values to compete with a monopoly, only to lose in the end.

## EXPLOITATION THROUGH SURVEILLANCE

Another example of the manipulation and exploitation of women can be seen in the department store's theft prevention and robbery policies. To prevent or catch potential robberies, Zola uses one of the shop workers, Inspector Jouve, as a version of a modern-day undercover employee. The store's management sends one of the stronger men who work there to follow around "suspicious" women to catch them in the act of stealing. It is almost like fishing, with Mouret as the fisherman who utilizes bait—the glorious fabrics and goods sold—to reel in the fish, the poor, female consumers with deals and everything imaginable, but is surprised when they take the bait.

### **Case Study 2: Madame de Boves**

Madame de Boves is one of the most prominent lady shoppers who frequents "The Ladies' Delight," and who is caught stealing. Zola depicts her vice—kleptomania—as most similar to lust, and she is also unable to resist temptation like Madame Marty. However, her husband provides her with even less money than the latter, so despite being an aristocrat Madame de Boves is lower in the economic hierarchy. She, therefore, has a harder time resisting the beautiful luxuries plastered all around her whilst in the department store. Once Inspector Jouve catches her "slipping lace" (Zola 410), she is forced to come into an office alone with men to discuss her crime.

As scholars Ronald A. Fullerton and Girish N. Punj have studied, Paul Dubuisson, a French alienist and early psychiatrist, produced a study in 1901 analyzing reports of shoplifting in over one hundred Parisian department stores (10). Dubuisson gives the story of a woman known as Madame G, who "had been arrested on September 3rd at 7:00 PM in Printemps [department store]... having concealed under her garments a silk garment..." (qtd. in Fullerton and Punj 10). Late nineteenth-century Paris saw a multitude of tales of upper-class women stealing from the prominent department stores that lured them. The response to a shoplifting incident in a department store could have been to contact law enforcement, work with them to arrest

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the perpetrator, and retrieve the stolen items. In contrast, Zola reveals that Mouret's actions are motivated by the exploitation of women through attempts to keep the fantasy of the luxurious department store alive.

Thus, rather than approaching law enforcement and merely requiring Madame de Boves to give back the items, Mouret and his underlings instead push for a more immoral and unethical guideline. They make the thief, in this case the well-known Madame de Boves, sign a paper that states she stole from the store and will pay them two thousand francs (Zola 412). This example shows that rich business owners prioritize profits over everything else. Zola enhances this argument by pointing out how Mouret's advertisement techniques specifically target women, putting out deals and beautifully cheap designs that reel them in. Instead of dealing with theft legally or ethically, Mouret keeps the stealing hidden from public view to maximize profits and ensure women feel "safe" and keep coming back to his store. Mouret aims to make the store a place where women can become the fantasy version of themselves, whilst also actively harming women with manipulation tactics and abrasive policies to maintain the facade of an "escape from reality" the store provides (Hennessy 700).

## CAPITALISM AND SURVEILLANCE

Similarly, a strong argument that derives from Zola's depiction of this scene is how the rise of surveillance is connected to the rise of capitalism. Although theft may have been apparent in smaller, family-owned businesses, the sheer size and number of products displayed and sold at "The Ladies' Delight" leads to an extreme increase in the potential for theft, so much so that management makes their male workers follow women around the store, stereotyping and profiling them based on their dress and attributes. Mouret and the other male managers assume that the women more likely to steal are those who are pregnant and those who are least able to afford the store's expensive, luxury goods, specifically the poor and working class. The mistreatment of women as consumers and the stereotyping and prejudice against poor and working-class women work in tandem to marginalize them further, especially with capitalism and other social systems at play.

The department store can be seen as a sort of prison which entraps women with its alluring commodities and forces them to forever yearn to attain them. Hennessy furthers this idea by mentioning that the store is "a self-contained, enclosed environment in which desire is never entirely fulfilled" (705). Moreover, the comparison of a prison proves true when viewing Zola's novel through the eyes of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in which he discusses the changes in the legal and prison systems in France during the early 1900s. Foucault depicts the mistreatment of the judicial system by painting a picture of guards standing watch above the "prisoner," looking down on them both metaphorically and literally (Foucault 50). This can be seen with Mouret, representing a prison guard as he stands on the top floor bannisters of "The Ladies Delight," overlooking all the shoppers in the store (Zola 415). The use of Inspector Jouve and other male managers to silently and quickly apprehend shoplifters and bring them to the back office was "to prevent any escape or show of force" (Foucault 50). Mouret strategizing ways to keep the "fantasy" alive and uphold a facade of "safety" within the department store is another way of preventing backlash from the women shoppers. It is not only women being manipulated and misled by the tactics of the store's owners, but it is also the intentional imprisonment of women consumers, locked away by their own desires which were exploited to begin with.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Although Zola's novel is set in the 1880s, it is still relevant today. Its portrayal of the implications of some of the founding uses of surveillance in department stores and in modern capitalism can be seen bleeding into current business practices. For example, the creation and implementation of self-checkout aisles in retail stores can be seen as the modern replacement for a "Mouret;" the cameras angled to constantly watch shoppers scan their items, sometimes with facial recognition, is the new way to deter shoplifting rather than utilizing only employees. Zola documented the late nineteenth-century version of this practice and predicted the inevitable effects of capitalism and the exploitative tendencies in which it results. It is beyond the scope of this present paper, but future research might explore the impacts of changing methods of surveillance in the practices of

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consumption both in relation to in-person contexts and online consumerism.

## CONCLUSION

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In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Émile Zola demonstrates the exploitation of women, both as salespeople and as consumers. Set against the rise of capitalism and other forms of modern commerce which took the nineteenth-century city by storm, Zola's novel shows that his fictional version of Paris's flagship department store, "The Ladies' Delight," furthered opportunities to manipulate and use women for the benefit of rich men. By forcing young women to compete with each other due to commission-based sales, the conditions of the new retail system made it almost impossible for working women to climb the social ladder. Moreover, advertisements targeting women as consumers with low prices reeled women in and entrapped them with a taste of the luxury goods offered. Even when allowed opportunities to leave the house to work or shop, women were still persistently monitored and exploited to increase the profits of the store owners. This essay builds on Zola scholarship by calling attention to the issues with surveillance, with the use of male workers to deter shoplifting and the avoidance of police intervention when faced with thefts as compounding the exploitation of not only women laborers but also consumers. As such it joins broader research on Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* concerned with the rise of modernity in relation to the mistreatment of the working class and women across the socio-economic spectrum.

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