Abstract

The Victorian need to compartmentalise and define women’s sexuality in terms of opposing binaries was paralleled by the vague idea that the period’s French and British literatures were at odds with one another. Elucidating the deep connections between, and common concerns shared by, French Naturalist and Realist and British New Woman authors, this thesis shatters the dichotomies that attempted to structure and define women’s sexuality in the mid- to late- nineteenth century.

The thesis focusses on novels and short stories by French authors Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, and New Woman authors Sarah Grand, Ménie Muriel Dowie and Vernon Lee. In a time during which the feminist movement was gaining momentum, and female sexuality was placed at the heart of a range of discourses, and scrutinised from a number of different angles – not only in literature, but in medicine, psychology, sexology, criminology – the consideration of the female sexual self and her subjectivity brings together the work of authors whose oeuvres have been largely considered as antithetical. Previous work has indeed shown the centrality of female sexuality to both literatures, yet never compared them. This thesis rediscovers the significance of both literatures’ investment in a discourse revolving around female sexuality by contrasting the French male authors with the British female writers, and uncovering unexpected parallels in their claims about the contemporary situation of women.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe*’s feminist philosophy frames the thesis’s comparative analysis, questioning and re-examining these authors’ representations of female sexuality. The ideas of sensuality and rationality,
motherhood, reproduction, marriage, and prostitution thus become recurring concerns throughout it. The thesis’s first chapter considers the female as sexual subject and/or object of the male gaze, in a range of New Woman and French literature. The second and third chapters are organised around the themes of marriage and prostitution, and the final chapter considers issues of female sexuality within the fantastic short story.
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Introduction | Observing the “Other”: Representing Female Sexuality in French and British Fiction

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Fig. 1. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *Nu Devant Miroir*. 1897. Oil on cardboard.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Nu Devant Miroir* (1897) represents a woman standing naked in front of a mirror. She is attentively looking at herself, but we, as onlookers, can only see her partially, both from behind, and from the front, in the reflected image. This painting conveys some of the central questions which I will consider in this introduction. While the (male) artist has painted his (female) model, rendered his view of her, and “framed” her within the work of art, there is a hint at the model’s own image of herself, which is also framed within the mirror she is gazing at. The similarities and differences between the male artist and the female model’s conceptions of what she is very much resemble the problematic question of the male/female author and his/her female characters. Both as the object of the male gaze, in the fiction of the male authors, and as the subject of female authors’ own rendering of women’s experience, the (gendered) representation of female sexuality is at the centre of my concerns, and the question that I seek to answer in this thesis is: can these perceptions be reconciled?

*The British New Woman, and French Naturalism and Realism*
The fin de siècle witnessed the emergence of the figure of the New Woman. The term “New Woman” was coined by Sarah Grand (1854 – 1943) in an 1894 article entitled “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”. This figure was a complex one: as Sally Ledger writes,

the New Woman of the fin de siècle had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, and woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late-nineteenth century women’s movement. *(The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* 1)

The “multiple identity” to which Ledger refers was due to the contemporary situation of women: this was a time of “social, cultural, and political upheaval, [and] the New Woman epitomised the anxieties but also the hopes of the fin de siècle” (Heilmann, *The Late-Victorian Marriage Question* 1.ix). Earlier in the century, the ideology of gender-based separate spheres had been supported by the emerging theories of evolutionary biology: women were being represented as tender creatures of instinct, weaker than their male counterparts. In 1862, William Rathbone Greg had published an article entitled “Why are Women Redundant?” in which he described the increasingly pressing problem of young, unmarried women seeking work in Britain. Greg described the growing number of middle class single women between the ages of twenty and forty who would never marry, and who found themselves in the difficult need to find work. Greg opposed these women’s harsh conditions of life to what he, and Victorian society at large, considered to be women’s natural place and role within society:
there are hundreds of thousands of women [...] who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent existence of their own. ("Why are Women Redundant?" 5)

Greg claimed that it was essential to “woman’s being” to be “supported by men, and [...] minister to men” (26). None of the “natural duties” of women mentioned by Greg are in any way productive, or part of public life: women were reduced to the existence of what could be termed a decorative parasite (of men). This view of women’s role was known as the Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the House”¹. It was precisely this problematic, restrictive conception of women’s lives that was at the root of the New Woman’s demands.

As Sarah Grand put it, the final decades of the nineteenth century saw “Women [...] awaking from their long apathy” (“The New Aspect of the Woman Question” 271). The “Woman Question”² thus began to surface within the press. In “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”, Grand outlined several issues which would become key aspects both in the struggle for women’s emancipation, and in the literary representations of the New Woman. Grand proclaimed that the woman’s

¹ This expression had its origins in the title of a poem written by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) between 1854 and 1862. In it, he exalted the virtues of the perfect wife (incidentally, the inspiration for the poem was the woman to whom he was married). The poem depicted the wife within the home, and serving her husband: she was passive, powerless, meek, charming, graceful, self-sacrificing, pious, and, above all, pure. This image of the “Angel in the House” reinforced the ideology of separate spheres, which confined women to the private realm of the home, while men were free to enter the public domain and to work.

² In her Introduction to Women Who Did, Angelique Richardson delineates the Woman Question: “What constituted the nature of woman? What was her status and role? What difference did class make? What was the relationship of women to men [and] to education?” (xxxvi). These were problematic issues that questioned women’s position from every angle and in every aspect of life. These are also questions which I have constantly kept in mind while analysing the ways in which sexuality and eroticism were represented in both French and British fiction of the period.
sphere was not exclusively in the home (271). In addition to this, she placed great emphasis on the need for women to be educated, turning the conception of women as weaker, less intelligent beings on its head:

man deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge. He narrowed our outlook on life so that our view of it should be all distorted, and then declared that our mistaken impression of it proved us to be senseless creatures. (272)

Grand argued that the problem was not in women’s nature, but in the opportunities that were offered to them. Ouida’s (Maria Louise Ramé, 1839 – 1908) response to Grand’s article, published two months later and entitled “The New Woman”, exemplifies the opposition the emerging feminist movement was to encounter. Ouida maintained that the demand for women to expand their horizons was unnecessary, as there were “immense areas of influence [which she] wholly neglected. She does almost nothing with the resources she possesses, because her whole energy is concentrated on desiring and demanding those she has not” (613). In this article, she criticised the New Woman for wanting to enter public life, while not taking full advantage of the possibilities offered to her in the private realm (614). Ouida’s views were scathing, as she qualified the New Woman as an “unmitigated bore” (Ouida 610), and lamented “her fierce vanity, her undigested knowledge, her over-weening estimate of her own value and her fatal want of all sense of the ridiculous” (Ouida 615). There were many, both men and women, who opposed the New Woman’s ideas, and the literary manifestations of this figure caused as much controversy as the movement which inspired them.

“The fictional New Woman was a product of […] th[e] discursive sphere” (Ledger, “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism” 25) which was
questioning women’s roles in society. As I have noted, “the New Woman was perceived as a direct threat to classic Victorian definitions of femininity” (Ledger, Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle 22). She challenged the established conception of women in all areas of life, and particularly within the sexual realm. The ideal of the “Angel in the house” meant that a woman’s, or, more specifically, a lady’s eroticism was perceived as necessarily relegated to the marital and reproductive spheres. Sally Ledger notes that “despite th[e] silence surrounding female sexuality within the mainstream feminist movement, many of the fictional writers of the time had no qualms about constructing the New Woman as a voracious sexual subject” (Ledger, “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism” 30). A vast number of New Woman writers, engaged in the betterment of the conditions of life in which women lived, or committed to different branches of the emerging feminist movements, started depicting women in a manner which differed from the more conventional heroines which could be found in the traditional Victorian realist novel, and “delineating [...] powerful, intelligent, witty female figure[s]” (Schaffer 7). The appearance of the assertive, modern young woman of the fin de siècle was mirrored by the rise of a new way of writing, and of the involved authors’ innovative approach in their concern with issues which had been avoided until then. One of the ways in which this type of fiction broke with tradition was through its frank depictions of

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3 The New Woman was, however, by no means a “fixed” or “monodimensional” figure or movement. “Whilst medico-scientific discourse, for example, concentrated on the threat she apparently posed to women’s role as mothers, anti-feminist fictional discourse frequently constructed her as a sexual decadent. The New Woman writers themselves did not always agree on who or what the New Woman was: whilst Sarah Grand championed sexual purity and motherhood in The Heavenly Twins, Mona Caird’s attack on [the conventions surrounding] motherhood in The Daughters of Danaus is devastating. Grant Allen’s heroine in The Woman Who Did is a champion of free love, in contrast to the more sexually circumspect heroines of Grand’s novels. The constitutional feminists of the late nineteenth century saw themselves neither as campaigners against motherhood nor as sexual radicals, but as supporters of female suffrage” (Ledger, Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle 23). A great part of the interest of my thesis is precisely to compare and contrast these different, and often almost contradictory, opinions and positions within a number of texts against each other and against the French representations of the very same issues.
female eroticism, enabling it to come “under fresh scrutiny from a number of different perspectives” (Richardson, *Women Who Did* xxxiv), the women in these novels addressing problems and being involved in subjects which it would have been unthinkable to associate with female characters just a few years earlier. The increased popularity of the short story form also enabled female writers to experiment, placing “women and sexual relations […] at the heart of the ‘nineties short story” (Stubbs 106). The “sexual candour” which was perceived as its most salient characteristic placed the New Woman Novel “in the position French naturalism had held initially as the ‘decadent’ threat to the purity of the English tradition” (Ardis 30).

This relates directly to my thesis’ focus on French authors Émile Zola (1840 – 1902) and Guy de Maupassant (1850 – 1893), two of the country’s major exponents of naturalism and realism, respectively. The terms “realist” and “naturalist” are often misunderstood or believed to be interchangeable (Ledger, “Naturalism: ‘Dirt and Horror Pure and Simple’” 86-7), yet it is important to note the differences between the two schools. In France, writers such as Honoré de Balzac (1799 – 1850) and Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle, 1783 – 1842) can be considered to constitute the beginnings of the realist movement. It was, however, not until the mid-1850s that the term “realism” began generating debates and controversies (Morris 63). Pam Morris emphasises that “France is […] seen as the country in which the realist novel genre was most consciously pursued, debated, acclaimed and denounced throughout the [nineteenth] century” (47).

The final decades of the nineteenth century saw writers seeking a broader spectrum of subject matters, and exposing their will to transcend the limits of what was deemed too lowly, or obscene for fictional representation. As Katherine Kearns
notes, realism was the result of a desire “to see beyond forms traditionally recognised as aesthetically permissible” (3). In the preface to Germinie Lacerteux (1864), Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (1822 – 1896, and 1830 – 1870, respectively) set the reader’s taste for literature depicting high society against their own novel, rooted in the working classes and the reality of the “street”: “[le public] aime les romans qui font semblant d’aller dans le monde: ce livre vient de la rue” (5). One of the main preoccupations of the realist movement was, as its name suggests, to provide accurate and “real” representations of contemporary society, and one of its innovations was precisely the inclusion of all levels of society in its works. The word “vérité”, “truth”, was constantly invoked by realist writers to underpin the movement’s commitment to representing topics that were true to life. At the heart of realism’s commitment to the truth was also an acknowledgement of the reader’s distaste for subjects that, because of their lifelike qualities, were deemed unfit for literature: the Goncourt brothers write that “le public aime les romans faux: ce roman est un roman vrai” (5).

More than twenty years after the publication of the Goncourts’ Germinie Lacerteux, Maupassant disseminated his own theories on the realist novel in “Le Roman”, the preface to his 1887 novel Pierre et Jean. Despite his short career, Maupassant, who had been a disciple of Gustave Flaubert’s (1821 – 1880), was a prolific writer and one of the major exponents of the realist school at the end of the nineteenth century. In “Le Roman”, the writer not only positions realism as a

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4 “The public loves novels which pretend to introduce its readers into high society: this book comes from the streets”. Note: All translations, except where otherwise indicated, are mine.

5 “The public loves fictitious novels: this is a true novel”.
champion of truth, but, furthermore, argues that it is in stark opposition to the literary movements, such as Romanticism, for example\(^6\), that preceded it:

> après les écoles qui ont voulu nous donner une vision déformée, surhumaine, poétique, attendrissante, charmante ou superbe de la vie, est venue une école réaliste ou naturaliste qui a prétendu nous montrer la vérité, rien que la vérité et toute la vérité. (86)\(^7\)

Maupassant summarises realism in three essential elements: “l’émotion de la simple réalité”, “la révélation de ce qu’est véritablement l’homme contemporain”, and “des faits d’une vérité irrécusable et constante” (“Le Roman” 86)\(^8\). Yet, what is probably the most interesting idea in “Le Roman” is his explanation of the realist novelist’s need to “faire vrai” (104)\(^9\): according to him, real life is full of little details, and the order in which things happen might not suit the purpose of a novel. The novelist’s duty is therefore to pick and arrange the necessary elements to compose his work: “les Réalistes de talent devraient plutôt s’appeler des Illusionnistes” (“Le Roman” 103)\(^10\). Maupassant insists on the role of the novelist, who must arrange the novel as to dispel any trace of its fictional nature:

> le romancier […] qui prétend nous donner une image exacte de la vie, doit éviter avec soin tout enchaînement d’évènements qui paraîtrait exceptionnel. Son but […] est […] de […] nous forcer à penser, à

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\(^6\) It is also interesting to note how this idea of Maupassant’s had already been exemplified in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *L’Éducation Sentimentale* (1869), for example, which critics often consider from the point of view of a struggle between romanticism and realism. As Lawrence R. Schehr notes in *Rendering French Realism*, “both [novels] are attempts at dislodging […] encrypted romantic remains: the first shows the fictional nature of romantic desire; the second shows the deception and disappointment […] that come with a fidelity to an outmoded formula for the presentation of love” (219).

\(^7\) “After the schools that have tried to give us a deformed, superhuman, poetical, moving, charming, or splendid vision of life, comes a realist or naturalist school which claims to show us the truth, nothing but the truth, and the whole truth”. It is interesting to note how this statement echoes the full title of his earlier novel *Une Vie: L’Humble Vérité* (1883, *The Humble Truth*).

\(^8\) “The emotion of simple reality”, “the revelation of what contemporary man truly is”, “facts that are imbued with irrefutable, constant truth”.

\(^9\) “Make real”.

\(^10\) “Talented Realists should rather be called Illusionists”.
comprendre le sens profond et caché des événements. ("Le Roman" 62-8)\textsuperscript{11}

As Philippe Hamon writes in *Le Personnel du Roman*, “le moment réaliste […] se caractérise […] par la volonté de dévaloriser l’intrigue, le récit, d’en casser les prestiges et les effets les plus voyants, […] d’éliminer tout ce qui pourrait rappeler les procédés du théâtre et du feuilleton” (318)\textsuperscript{12}. Maupassant is an interesting figure: as I have noted, he was a disciple of Flaubert’s, yet, at the beginning of his career, he briefly formed part of the circle of writers\textsuperscript{13} who would get together at Zola’s country house in Médan, and who, in 1880, published a collection of short stories entitled *Les Soirées de Médan*, which is “often considered and promoted as a manifesto of naturalism” (Wolter 107).\textsuperscript{14}

I would now like to consider naturalism by beginning with some reflections on its similarities and differences with realism. In *Realism and Naturalism*, Richard Daniel Lehan describes realism as “the bridge between romance and the naturalistic novel” (3). It seems to me that Lehan’s connection of the three movements is accurate, and particularly in light of Sally Ledger’s definition of naturalism as “an intensification of mid-century realism” (“Naturalism: ‘Dirt and Horror Pure and Simple’” 87). Common to realism and naturalism was the will to portray things as

\textsuperscript{11} “The novelist […] who claims to give us an exact reproduction of life has to carefully avoid any succession of events which might seem out of the ordinary. His goal […] is […] to […] force us to think, and to understand the deep, hidden truth of events”.

\textsuperscript{12} “The realist period […] is characterised […] by the will to devalue plot and storytelling, to shatter their prestige and most obvious effects, […] to eliminate anything that could remind one of the methods of the theatre or serialised literature”.

\textsuperscript{13} This group of writers included Maupassant and Zola, as well as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique and Paul Alexis.

\textsuperscript{14} Incidentally, Maupassant’s contribution to the collection, the short story “Boule de Suif”, was his first successful piece of writing. His involvement in the group’s collection of stories is generally seen by critics as a somewhat opportunistic move: David Baguley notes that “Maupassant […] privately at least, was […] scornful of Zola’s theories, even though publicly he defended the novelist with conviction” (*Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* 21). In “The Médan Group and the Campaign of Naturalism”, Jennifer K. Wolter writes that “after having intersected briefly in the Médan group to promote naturalism and [himself], […] Maupassant […] now had the notoriety to continue on [his] separate [way]” (117).
they were, and one of the distinguishing traits of both realist and naturalist authors was their extensive documentation and research on the subjects they would write about. As Sally Ledger notes, “what the mid-century realists and late-century naturalists had in common was a fundamental conviction that art is essentially a mimetic, objective representation of an outer reality, in contrast to the imaginative transfigurations favoured by the earlier Romantics” (“Naturalism: ‘Dirt and Horror Pure and Simple’” 87). There are, however, some very significant and defining divergences between the two movements.

Zola, principal exponent of the naturalist school, sought to introduce a scientific method of observation to the novel. It is precisely this scientific scope which sets naturalism apart from realism. Zola first formulated this idea in the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), but it is in his 1880 work, *Le Roman Expérimental*, that he outlines his theories in the clearest manner. This manifesto was published eight years after Zola began working on the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle (written between 1871 and 1893), in which he attempts to illustrate, as the cycle’s title itself suggests, the natural and social history of a family during the Second Empire (1852 – 1870). There are two significant influences on Zola’s work that need to be mentioned. The first is the work of French physiologist Claude Bernard (1813 – 1878), and in particular, his *Introduction à l’Étude de la Médecine Expérimentale* (1865), which provided Zola with the foundation for his experimental approach to the novel. In *Le Roman Expérimental*, the novelist affirms “je compte, sur tous les points, me retrancher derrière Claude Bernard” (2). The second is Balzac’s *La Comédie Humaine*, written between 1830 and 1856, a collection of novels and stories to which Zola’s cycle bears significant similarities. As Christopher Rivers writes,

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16 “I intend to rely on Claude Bernard’s ideas for all the aspects [of my work]”.
the fundamental agenda of Zola’s ambitious [...] cycle is also that of uncovering systems of explanation, both “natural” and social, of human behaviour. Although Zola posits as his authority different fields of “scientific inquiry” than does Balzac, his basic agenda is the same. (176)\(^{17}\)

In Zola’s vision, the realist ideal of the novel’s duty to tell the truth took on a new meaning, as his work became an attempt “to overcome [the] tendency to differentiate between works of fiction and works of science” (Downing 75). Zola proclaimed that “dès ce jour, la science entre […] dans notre domaine, à nous romanciers, qui sommes à cette heure des analystes de l’homme […]. Nous continuons, par nos observations et nos expériences, la besogne du physiologiste” (Le Roman Expérimental 16)\(^{18}\). Taking realism’s conception of “vérité” one step further, Zola gave his œuvre “la rigueur d’une vérité scientifique” (Le Roman Expérimental 2)\(^{19}\). As Christian Mbarga puts it, naturalism was “un mariage heureux entre la science et le réalisme” (7)\(^{20}\).

In the Rougon-Macquart cycle, Zola’s goal was to use the experimental method in order to emphasise the importance of heredity on man. His choice to focus on one family for twenty novels enabled him to demonstrate the transmission of hereditary defects from one generation to the next. In Le Roman Expérimental, he explains that “la question d’hérédité a une grande influence dans les manifestations

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17 Zola wrote a piece entitled “Différences entre Balzac et Moi” (1869) in which he positioned his work in relation to the earlier writer’s. In it, he writes: “mon œuvre, à moi, sera tout autre chose. […] Ma grande affaire est d’être purement naturaliste, purement physiologiste. Au lieu d’avoir des principes (la royauté, le catholicisme) j’aurais des lois (l’hérédité)” – “my own work will be a completely different affair. […] My great preoccupation is to be purely a naturalist, a physiologist. Instead of having principles (royalty, Catholicism), I will have laws (heredity)” (n.p.). Again, the scientific endeavour is what sets him apart from his predecessors.

18 “From now on, science becomes, for us novelists, a part of our field, and we ourselves become analysts of man […]. We further, through our observations and experiences, the physiologist’s work.”

19 “The precision of a scientific truth”.

20 “A happy marriage between science and realism”.
intellectuelles et passionnelles de l’homme” (18)\(^{21}\): heredity can therefore be understood to affect all aspects of the characters’ lives. Another central element of his project was to showcase the role of environment: Zola considers that “le milieu social a […] une importance capitale” (Le Roman Expérimental 18)\(^{22}\). In keeping with this idea, his novels depict characters from all walks of life: from the politicians in Son Excellence Eugène Rougon (1876), to the Parisian working class in L’Assommoir (1877), and the farmers in La Terre (1887), for example. Lehan considers that “realist writers […] portrayed the individual struggling for identity in a hostile society. Literary naturalism deepened this depiction by making the individual less resilient and the environment more hostile” (6). Heredity and milieu thus came together to create a sort of great social tapestry of the Second Empire in Zola’s œuvre. In Mes Haines: Causeries Littéraires et Artistiques (1866), Zola writes that “il ne saurait […] y avoir de limite dans l’étude de la vérité” (81)\(^{23}\). His constant endeavour to push those boundaries further in his quest for truth served as a basis for most contemporary criticism of Zola’s work. The fact that his work was more erotically daring than the norm meant that his novels ended up being qualified as pornographic in his time.\(^{24}\) Female sexuality is one of the preoccupations which are

\(^{21}\) “The topic of heredity has a great influence on the intellectual and passionate manifestations of man”.

\(^{22}\) “Social milieu has […] a capital significance”.

\(^{23}\) “There can be […] no limits to the study of truth”.

\(^{24}\) Throughout his career, “bourgeois critics noisily accused Zola of pornography” (Nelson 8). His detractors attacked him for “vulgarity, tastelessness, stylistic crudity and a purported obsession with the filthy underside of society” (Nelson 12). Carolyn Janice Dean notes that, In France, “although authorities refrained from censoring the naturalist Zola because of his popularity, he was always called a pornographic writer because of his detailed descriptions of all kinds of ‘vices’. Zola was consistently attacked […] because he wrote ‘filthy and unwholesome’ books; he was […] detested […] because he ‘redefined disgust as a form of morality’, ‘scandal as glory’, and ‘cynicism as genius’” (73). In Britain, however, the attacks on Zola took a legal turn: in 1887, Henry Vizetelly, Zola’s publisher, was prosecuted and imprisoned for three months for obscene libel when he published Zola’s La Terre. Sally Ledger emphasises the uproar caused by the Vizetelly trial: “the National Vigilance Association, one of a number of self-appointed guardians of the late-nineteenth century’s sexual and social mores, responded to Henry Vizetelly’s publication of […] Zola’s La Terre (1887) by circulating a transcript of the trial and conviction of the elderly publisher, along with numerous […] excerpts from
central to Zola’s work, deeply inscribed within his contemporary desire to “determine
the truth of sexuality through analysis of the female subject” (Mesch 7). His concern
with the role of women is evident in the Rougon-Macquart series, in which he
explores the continuing degeneration of a family as transmitted from their ancestor,
Tante Dide. As Anna Gural-Migdal notes, “la question féminine est au cœur du
naturalisme, ne serait-ce que parce qu’il est fondé en partie sur l’idée de
reproduction, donc de fécondité” (1)25.

Whilst critics such as Rita Felski have described the “imaginary identification
with the feminine [permeating] much of the writing of the male European avant-
garde in the late-nineteenth century” (1094), I believe it is more appropriate to label
their writing as an investigation into and of the feminine, both due to, for example,
the rigorous, scientific approach of Zola’s method, and also to the need to
emphasise the significance of these male writers’ contributions to an expanding body
of knowledge that was contemporary to them. Stéphane Michaud argues that

la France manifeste […] plus nettement et plus tôt qu’aucun autre pays
à quel point toute une part de la floraison artistique et intellectuelle
s’alimente à une représentation sexuée des choses qui fixe pour but à
l’homme la domination de l’inquiétante étrangeté féminine. (Michaud
136)26

The concern with the impact of sexual depictions of female characters in literature
has often been interpreted as a reinforcement of the patriarchal nature of the relation
between the sexes. Rachel Mesch’s point of view about the study of sexuality
through the female body (7) also implies that a male writer’s observation and, in a way, assessment of the female body and mind with regard to sexuality further empowered his own voice. I feel that such views have too often obstructed more profitable readings of such writers as Zola and Maupassant, who are quite commonly regarded as misogynistic. As an avid reader of these two authors, I have always felt that their work was committed to convey very complex images of women. These erroneous views on their fiction are the reason why I chose to approach their fiction for my study of female sexuality in France and Britain. Approaching these French texts alongside the New Woman fiction of the British fin de siècle sheds light on the neglected nuances of both literatures’ depictions of female eroticism. In the following section, I will detail some of the literary clashes between French realism and naturalism and New Woman fiction: the period’s juxtaposition of these literary traditions serving as the motivation for my choice of authors.

The Trouble with France

In 1892 (the English translation was published in 1895), Max Nordau published Degeneration (original title, Entartung), in which he devoted a whole chapter to Émile Zola, and the same year saw the publication of Hugh E. M. Hadlock notes that Maupassant is known for “his highly unfavourable attitude toward femininity” and insists on “the objectification and victimisation of women which have come to be associated with [his] portrayal of […] female characters” (281). Margaret H. Darrow describes Zola’s Nana (1880) as “unmistakably misogynist” (11). In The Trials of Masculinity, Angus McLaren writes: “on the continent, from the 1870s onward, a host of male writers, playing on strong misogynistic cultural themes, launched a backlash against the modern advances women had made in work and education. In France, […] Émile Zola […] added [his] misogynistic musings to […] older theories of female subordination” (31).

In “Sexual Variations”, Lisa Downing writes that Zola was “a keen reader of medical theses” who particularly enjoyed the writings of French and German sexologists, as well as Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, and Nordau himself (75). She reports that, in 1890, Zola sent his most recent novel, La Bête Humaine, to both Lombroso and Nordau, with “very different results”.

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Stutfield’s “Tommyrotics”, in which he heavily critiqued New Woman literature, to name but two examples. These two works used the very same ideas and concepts in their evaluations of these two literatures. Nordau’s attack on the naturalist school described it as having “nothing to do with nature or reality”, being closer to a “premeditated worship of pessimism and obscenity” (497). Stutfield deemed New Woman literature, that “neurotic and repulsive fiction”, “a somewhat similar, and scarcely less unlovely, offspring of hysteria and foreign ‘degenerate’ influence” (122). While Nordau labelled Zola “a high-class degenerate” specialising in “images of unnatural vice” (500), Stutfield similarly condemned the New Woman’s “diseased imaginings, […] passion for the abnormal, the morbid, and the unnatural” (124). Popular opinion and ideologues of the fin de siècle identified and lamented what they perceived to be the degenerate and sordid influence of French literature on British literature. While my work does not deal extensively with the contemporary reception of the works I consider, it is nevertheless important to establish a context of both some of the debates arising as a result of these fictions, and the reactions to French literature in Britain at the time.

Another point of contact between the two works is their denouncing of both Zola and the New Women’s involvement in the scientific debates of the time. Grand’s work “derived from the medico-scientific sphere” (Bauer 97), and its concern with “making accessible epistemologies of the female body that circulated in the specialist male medical realm” (Bauer 102) is, indeed, reminiscent of Zola’s experimental novel in its scope. Stutfield dismisses the New Woman’s real knowledge of any scientific facts - “With her head full of […] sex-problems and heredity, and other gleanings from the surgery and the lecture-room” (Stutfield 124) – while Nordau asserts that Lombroso writing approvingly of the physiognomical characterisation in the novel (75), and Nordau launching his attack in Degeneration.
“the results at which M. Zola arrives in his pretended ‘experiment’ do not exist objectively, they exist only in his imagination; they are not facts, but assertions” (490).

In an 1895 article entitled “Literary Denenerates”, Janet E. Hogarth turned her attention to both British female authors and French male authors of the fin de siècle, after the fashion of Nordau’s attack on Zola. She begins by lamenting the fact that Nordau’s focus on French literature has caused him to pay little attention to female-authored narratives, and in particular British ones:

[Nordau] has chosen his examples so largely from France, that it has probably not occurred to him to vary their sex. Feminine talent plays but a small part in contemporary French literature, but if he had turned his eyes oftener to England, surely he would have found a promising field for speculation in our rising school of women writers. (587)

Interestingly, Hogarth describes New Woman literature as “more or less admirable in manner, certainly more rather than less objectionable in matter” (588). Emphasising the stylistic extravagance of the New Woman writers, their “impressionist, […] suggestive” (588) mode of writing, Hogarth warns the reader of the perils attached to these seductive, yet thoroughly degenerate fictions, and does so by explicitly drawing a comparison between them and the French authors abhorred by Nordau:

Even in its deepest depths of degradation, French art generally contrives to shroud the corpse of sensuality in the fair, white linen garment of a beautiful style. Most of the women who dissect their souls in the pages of the Yellow Book, or in the novel with or without a purpose, have caught more than a passing echo of the saving grace of
words. [...] They can seize the pictorial moment, and record a fleeting phase with a technical skill that often disarms the hostile critic. (589)

Hogarth points to the lack of familiarity with ancient Greek and Latin texts, and an excessive admiration of authors such as Ibsen and Tolstoy, but more particularly of several French literary movements—“Decadents, Diabolists, Parnassians, Symbolists” (589). Her article condemns the “over rapid emancipation” (592) of women and their “shameless depth of ignorance” (592) for these female authors’ “diabolical manifestations” (592), and chooses to end her article with the hope that “the modern heroine’s admirable manner of expressing herself may outlast her repulsive qualities, to the exceeding great benefit of literature and society” (592).

This article is fascinating in its attempt to draw comparisons and identify influences between the two literatures, and in the way it relates style and content to degeneracy.

Naturalism, decadence and New Woman writing were juxtaposed and lampooned as a threat to the *status quo*. As Ledger and Luckhurst note, and as is
obvious after my brief summarising of some of Nordau, Stutfield and Hogarth’s arguments, “both [were] attacked for their ‘candour’ in sexual matters and their ‘scientific’ scrutiny of areas of human experience considered sordid by the literary establishment” (97). It became increasingly clear to the critics of the time that New Woman fiction owed its frankness and candour to the “lubricous and morbidly analytical influence […] of contemporary French literature” (Dowling 441). As Linda Dowling notes,

The commentators who identified the New Woman with the decadent were seldom content merely to denounce the sexual expressiveness in literature espoused both by “decadent” writers (those who imitated or were interested in Continental avant-garde experiments) and by the New Woman novelists […]. Reviewers felt compelled instead to warn their readers of the evolutionary and worse, the revolutionary dangers to Victorian civilisation embodied in the new avant-gardism. (437)

Such a view was vehemently denied by the New Woman authors themselves. Reclaiming the right to find a space for an exploration of woman as a sexual being was harmed by the parallelisms between their writing and the French “predilection for the foul and repulsive, the pulling emotionalism, and the sickly sensuousness of the French decadents” (Stutfield 121).

The Yellow Book suggests, aestheticism and Decadence were part of an avant-gardist cultural formation thoroughly peopled by women as literary and artistic subjects, not simply as objects of the male Decadent gaze (Ledger, “Wilde Women and The Yellow Book: The Sexual Politics of Aestheticism and Decadence” 23). The fiction of some of The Yellow Book’s female contributors, such as Ella D’Arcy or George Egerton, could in fact be considered to form part of both decadence and New Woman literature, for example.

30 It is fascinating to note how this consideration of French literature as immoral and filled with “vice” was widespread in Europe. The French novel is even mentioned by Engels in contraposition to the German in The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State: "the French bourgeois is as much horrified by the dullness of the German novel as the German philistine is by the 'immorality' of the French" (86).
The obscenity charges and sensationalist accusations made against New Woman literature overshadowed many of the serious, and indeed quite restrained depictions found in these fictions. Although some writers chose to depict or discuss sexual freedom and pleasure in their fiction, there were others, such as Grand, for example, who preferred to depict female characters who chose morality instead of sexuality. In *New Woman Strategies*, Ann Heilmann poses the question, “was [the New Woman] essentially a conservative angered by the sexual double standard and the lack of civic virtue in men which endangered women and children, but otherwise largely complicit with the language and thought of the fathers?” (15). Whilst much has been written about the various “strands” of first-wave feminism and their different views on female sexuality, dispelling the notion of French literature as an obscene precursor to New Woman literature, there is a lack of scholarship addressing these issues in conjunction with one another. Many critics have dealt with French and New Woman literature, yet, perhaps precisely because of this, and because of the cultural value that is generally conferred on both, the damming comments of the period’s contemporaries have not been taken further. While I do not mean to imply that the opinions of a Stutfield, Nordau, or Hogarth were correct in identifying New Woman literature as a mere product of French “inspiration”, I do believe that much can be gained from a comparative analysis of the two. Moreover, despite acknowledging that “support for the emancipation of women did not fall neatly into gendered camps but persisted among […] both sexes” (Richardson, *Women Who Did* xxxviii), recent criticism has not examined these French fictions from a more feminist perspective. If the concern with sex and the complexity of the female character was indeed such a prevalent characteristic in both literatures, could it not also follow that there could be

similarities in their exploration of the *condition féminine*? And, more importantly, can this signify an *avant l’heure* investment, and, in a way, delineation of, the “Woman Question” on the part of authors who have until now been widely regarded as misogynistic? Thus, my thesis’s main concern is to compare and contrast the French and British representations of female sexuality and desire. What are the different ways in which these authors allow for female sexual independence and subjectivity to be explored, and what claims about the contemporary status of women can be understood from these? What do the similarities and differences between the earlier French male authors and the later British female authors mean?

Identifying certain exponents of the French naturalist, realist, or decadent schools as having *influenced* New Woman literature is not the scope of my work. On the other hand, what I do consider necessary is to re-examine these French authors as “unlikely predecessors” of the authors of the British literature of first-wave feminism. I do not wish, through this term, to imply a lack of originality or a direct influence of the earlier French works on the later British ones. Furthermore, and perhaps even more so in the case of Maupassant, it would also be problematic to refer to these French authors as “proto-feminist”, yet I strongly believe that certain elements of these authors’ works have much in common with the New Woman movement. Admittedly, the works of Zola and Maupassant almost invariably precede those of Sarah Grand, Victoria Cross, Menie Muriel Dowie, Vernon Lee and George Egerton, yet this is not a study in literary influence, but an examination of the concerns and issues flourishing in the representations of female sexuality in those two countries. This is not to say, however, that the differences in gender and scope between my chosen authors are of no consequence, yet my primary focus has been to identify the common preoccupations and to question the reason for the similar, or
different, treatment of the issues at stake by male and female, not to mention feminist, authors. By bringing the two literatures together, I believe I have, in a way, demolished a barrier between the two cultures, enabling these authors to enter into a sort of fruitful dialogue which, unfortunately, never could nor did take place.\footnote{Although Grand makes references to French fiction in her work, she never met Zola, or Maupassant. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the French authors would have read Grand. I like to think that my work, in uncovering the parallelisms between the two literatures, becomes a sort of conversation between these authors. An example of a reference to French literature in Grand’s fiction happens in \textit{The Heavenly Twins}, when Colquhoun gives Evadne some French books – “Zola and Daudet complete, and George Sand. You’ll like them better, I fancy, when you get into them than Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton” (176). He is described as “anticipating much entertainment from the observation of their effect upon her. He expected that she would end by making love to him” (176). Here, Grand’s views on the corrupting effect of these novels, but also on their inherent degeneracy, are clear. In \textit{The Beth Book}, Dr. Galbraith says of French books that he finds them “monotonous, and barren of happy phrases to enrich the mind, of noble sentiments to expand the heart, of great thoughts to help the soul; without balance, with little of the redeeming side of life, and less aspiration towards it. If France is to be judged by the tendency of its literature and art at present, one would suppose it to be dominated and doomed to destruction by a gang of lascivious authors and artists who are sapping the manhood of the country and degrading the womanhood by idealising self-indulgence and mean intrigue” (7729).} In doing so, I have uncovered a fascinatingly multi-dimensional portrayal of female sexuality during the second half of the nineteenth century. These fictions mirrored and anticipated each other and in doing so, illuminate each other, bringing to light questions, tentative answers, and presenting alternative possibilities concerning the nature and scope of female desire, sexuality and subjectivity.

It must be noted that, in France as in Britain, and during the last decades of the century especially, women writers were beginning to address questions concerning women’s lives in a novel manner. As Janet Beizer states in \textit{Ventriloquized Bodies}, “already beginning to take shape in the 1880s was the mythologised spectre the 1890s would call the \textit{femme nouvelle}, the overeducated, overambitious woman who inverted gender roles and dislocated bourgeois values” (256). One of the most comprehensive analyses of the literature written by French women in the nineteenth century is Alison Finch’s \textit{Women’s Writing in Nineteenth-Century France}. Finch
stresses the “unmistakable shifts in emphasis in women’s works after 1870 [one of which] was the straightforward expression of the idea that things [were] changing and that what [was emerging in the] last years of the nineteenth century [was] the modern woman” (170). In her novel Hellé (1898), Marcelle Tynaire challenged the idea of marriage as a mere economic transaction, highlighting the greater significance of intellectual and sentimental understanding between the man and woman. Gyp (Gabrielle de Mirbeau) was a naturalist writer, specialising in “tomboyish or iconoclastic heroines” (Finch 256). Louise Michel, an anarchist writer (Finch 199), dedicated some of her writing to her fight against animal cruelty, similarly to Sarah Grand, and was well known for sporting men’s clothes in public, which was considered as revealing her feminist leanings (Finch 202-4). Marie Bashkirsteff (1860-1884) left a diary written in French, which Simone de Beauvoir repeatedly cites in Le Deuxième Sexe. Alison Finch writes that female-authored French fin-de-siècle “female characters [adopted] such unladylike customs as smoking, and drinking to the point of intoxication” (176), which reminds one of the smoking, cycling New Woman in British fiction of the time. In 1878, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly famously wrote “les femmes qui écrivent ne sont plus des femmes. Ce sont des hommes, du moins de prétention, et manqués! Ce sont des Bas-bleus” (11). Rachel Mesch points to the French tendency to associate “female authorship with moral decay and mental instability” (1), and Goldberg Moses stresses that, earlier in the century, feminist writers in France, such as George Sand (1804 – 1876), often built on the Romantic image of the ideal woman to further their cause (18). One of the most renowned French feminists of the time was Maria Deraismes

33 “Women who write are no longer women. They are men, or at least claim to be, and failed men, at that! They are bluestockings.”
34 Goldberg Moses stresses these early feminists’ awareness of the problematic nature of the Romantic ideal of womanhood: “[i]n all roles, the Romantic woman was the ideal good. [...] [C]ertainly
(1828 – 1894). Like Josephine Butler in Britain, Deraismes was heavily involved in the defence of prostitutes’ rights. Goldberg Moses emphasises how she “wrote about sexual passion and fulfillment as a goal for women” (183), and was also concerned with ideas of sexual morality, the sexual double standard, and the importance of marriage and parenthood, for example. Perhaps the most (in)famous woman writer of the French fin de siècle, although not explicitly a feminist, was Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery). Nicknamed “Mademoiselle Baudelaire” (Holmes 42) for her clear adherence to the decadent movement, she wrote such notorious novels as Monsieur Vénus (1884) and La Tour d’Amour (1899), and has, in the last few years, become a subject of intense study due to (pace Rachel Mesch) “her vision of a literary existence beyond gender” (192). Monsieur Vénus is in fact a striking example of “gender bending”, depicting, in a most vivid manner, a relationship between a man and a woman where the woman subverts all gender preconceptions, showcasing Rachilde’s “delight at the ‘mix-ups’ generated by polymorphous sexuality” (Finch 208). In 1931, looking back at those years, she proclaimed that “il n’y a pas de littérature féminine, Il y a des écrivains. Le sexe importe si peu” (Mesch 191)³⁵. Yet, to less daring and provocative writers, sex did, and does, matter.

Reevaluating the Connections between the New Woman and the French Male Authors

Although, as I have noted, feminist writing was flourishing in France as it was in Britain, my interest lies in the relationship between earlier French male-authored

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³⁵ “There is no women’s literature. There are only writers. Sex is of such little consequence”.

nineteenth-century feminists frequently employed Romantic language, idealising women to further their cause. But they recognised, too, that the ideal Romantic woman was no equal to man: she was childlike, dependent on men’s power for her very survival; she was also self-sacrificing, subordinating herself to men’s interests” (18).
texts and later British New Woman fiction, and, therefore, I do not discuss French feminist or female authors or writing of the period. Instead, my work focuses on British feminist writers, the thesis revolving around the need to re-examine the New Women authors’ rejection of any comparison between themselves and authors such as Zola. As I demonstrate throughout, there were in fact more common concerns in these two literatures than the New Woman authors were willing to admit or recognise. In an article on Zola’s later work, the *Quatre Évangiles*, a series of four novels published between 1899 and 1903, Gina Zupisch points out that the author “received a good deal of feminist acclaim” in France, his “new republican women increasingly demonstrat[ing] greater social, intellectual and financial independence” (161). With a particular attention to feminist journal *La Fronde*, Zupisch’s article demonstrates how fin-de-siècle feminists in France were engaging with and recognising Zola’s commitment to the Woman Question in his later novels, although this was not the case with his *Rougon-Macquart* series or earlier work. The attitude of the French feminists regarding Zola’s earlier experimental novel cycle was therefore very similar to that of the British feminists and New Woman writers (perhaps the latter were more extreme in their judgement due to, as I have noted, the detrimental effect of the comparisons between the two literatures). This fascinating lack of feminist recognition of the potential and similarities in scope of the representations of female characters in the *Rougon-Macquarts* is one that my thesis seeks to address.

For a long time, I found myself trying to force my research to show a divergence between my chosen French and British writers. My misguided belief that differences, rather than similarities, would prove of a higher interest to my study led me to insist on demonstrating a binary opposition of the aesthetic in France and the
sociological in England. Instead, I was increasingly finding that both literatures were deeply invested in the sociological aspects of their representation of female sexuality, but that the masculine perspective granted greater aesthetic awareness to these depictions. Furthermore, the aestheticising of female sexuality could not only be found in the fiction of French male writers, but also in the works of British New Woman writers using male narrators, such as the fiction by Victoria Cross or Vernon Lee. My stubborn insistence on dividing these two literatures into two camps, however, led me to identify and reflect upon the significance of the very idea of binary oppositions and dichotomies within my analysis of the depictions of sexuality.

I came to understand that it was the Victorian tendency to “divide” into precise and almost opposing compartments, and not my own need to identify these oppositions, which was at the core of my research. Seemingly neat and unquestionably contrasting pairs formed the basis of Victorian stability and normative behaviour: the husband and the wife, the private and the public spheres, the double moral standard, the “Angel in the house” and the prostitute, the “fallen woman” and the whore, “love” and sex, eroticism and motherhood, sensuality and respectability, and so on. What emerges from my comparative analysis of the French and British texts is the will, or, perhaps, the possibility of transcending, challenging, or, in some cases, redefining and reevaluating these binary oppositions in light of an overwhelmingly increasing female sexual subjectivity.

Although recent studies have considered, albeit separately, the role of sexuality in the French and British works and authors I have chosen, my aim is to question and re-examine assumptions about the contraposition of the French and British literature as well as the New Woman and the French “degenerate” woman. Although “women at this time were exploring new spaces, new interiors which had
previously been denied them, as they told their own stories, and, in doing so, constructed *themselves*" (Richardson *Women Who Did* lxvi), I feel that much can be gained from examining both men and women writing female sexuality. I examine these French and British authors by positioning them within the contemporary debates about female sexuality, and by scrutinising them from a Beauvoirian perspective by applying several sections of *Le Deuxième Sexe* to my analyses of the literature. Simone de Beauvoir’s work has in fact greatly influenced and shaped my own perspective on the different representations and claims that were being made through the fictional characters that can be found in these works. I chose to use de Beauvoir’s seminal text as the critical framework for my thesis for several reasons. The first of these is the existentialist nature of de Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy. When analysing works from a time during which women were very much understood from an essentialist point of view, the possibility of re-evaluating my chosen authors and works from an existentialist perspective not only uncovers new aspects of the French and British representations of female sexuality, but also serves as a way of contrasting the contemporary views found within the literature with my own theoretical approach. I also chose *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which was first published in 1949, as opposed to more recent feminist work, such as pro-sex feminism, for example, due to my wish to use a feminist perspective which is situated between the first-wave feminist thought the thesis deals with and the feminist thought which is being written nowadays. I also believe that the current wave of feminism’s positions regarding female sexuality would prove too extreme and too distant from the questions addressed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and as such, bear less relevance to the study of the literature of the time. Moreover, I believe that de Beauvoir’s way of writing, which combines philosophical thought, medical expertise,
personal experience, life writing, and literary analysis, lends itself particularly well to my own study, which is, ultimately, an effort to understand the representations of women’s lives written by different voices, different genders, and their relationship with their contemporary context. Throughout the thesis, the sections on myth, the young girl, sexual initiation, the married woman, prostitutes and hetaeras, and social life in de Beauvoir’s work are systematically applied to the relevant chapters in my work. The application of this feminist perspective gives greater depth and helps define more clearly the centrality of female experience and subjectivity.

The discourses and diverging points of view on the sexuality of the female characters in both countries were many. George Egerton’s (born Mary Chavelita Dunne) sexualised creations coexist with the more rational characters in The Heavenly Twins and Gallia. Zola shows us the virginal Denise in Au Bonheur des Dames, but also the deadly and voracious title character in Thérèse Raquin. While research on the New Woman has always acknowledged the plurality of opinions and representations within it, the same cannot be said of existing scholarship on the French authors. There is a tendency to go to extremes – Bertrand-Jennings advocates “la quasi-universalité de la malignité féminine” (8) in Zola’s œuvre, whilst, for example, Anna Krakowski argues that the writer does not believe in the “malignité originelle de la femme” (55)37. Frederick William John Hemmings’s evaluation of Zola’s “presentation of the processes of sex [as] terribly simplified” (148), for example, is challenged by my own setting aside of the two literatures. More often than not, Maupassant’s personal life has given way to preconceived notions about

36 Alison Finch highlights that “Le Deuxième Sexe owes its special character not only to existentialism: its presentation unmistakably resembles that of works by French female predecessors, in its mingling of fiction and life-writing as sources of evidence, and in its blend of argument with powerfully narrated vignettes of clashes between individual mothers and daughters, husbands and wives” (230).

37 “The quasi-universality of feminine evil”, “woman as the original evil”.
his views on women in criticism about his work.\textsuperscript{38} My thesis redresses the essential imbalance between such polarised and sometimes even largely misguided opinions as these. I have chosen not to emphasise authors’ biographies, or established misconceptions of their position regarding the issues concerning women and sexuality, except where relevant. My aim is to enable these works to be seen from a new standpoint, and from a decidedly feminist point of view, as we shall see later on.

Literature of the period was characterised by a male quest to understand the “unknowability” of woman, and a parallel endeavour to elucidate women by female writers. The effort to explain female sexuality through women’s subjectivity and experience brings these texts together. Male authors in France strove to observe woman, in a struggle to reconcile their attempt to define her through their own unequivocally desiring gaze with the awareness of her need and right to explain and reveal herself in her own words.

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Fig. 2. James Tissot. \textit{On the Thames}. 1874. Oil on canvas.

I think Louis Legrand’s caricature of Zola (see fig. 3), as well as Tissot’s \textit{On the Thames} (see fig. 2) in which the woman is presented, and presents herself, confidently looking at us, as an object to be admired, but also in a knowing, teasing way, and Charles Dana Gibson’s \textit{The Weaker Sex II} (see fig. 4) – although a later picture – show how observing the “Other” was a recurring preoccupation not only in the literature, but also in the art of the period. The women in Gibson’s picture are not

\textsuperscript{38} Many critics, as I have noted, have often mislabelled Maupassant’s fiction as misogynistic (see note 27 for more on this). This is often due, in part, to an overreliance on the application of biographical information about the author to his portrayal of women. Laurence A. Gregorio begins to identify this problem when he writes that “the same Maupassant who was known for a condescending and objectifying view of women was at the same time greatly devoted to his mother, and […] showed marked respect for the women in his large circle of acquaintances who captured his admiration” (Gregorio 41).
just subjecting the man on their table to a quasi-scientific gaze, but there is also a penetrative implication in their poking of their “subject” with a needle.\textsuperscript{39} It is interesting to see that Zola observes the naked woman with a magnifying glass, a reference to his scientific approach to the novel.

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Fig. 3. Louis Legrand. *Naturalisme*. 1890. Ink on paper.

Fig. 4. Charles Dana Gibson. *The Weaker Sex II*. 1903. Ink on paper.

New Woman authors saw their fiction as a unique opportunity to give an unmediated account of their own experience, in their own words. George Egerton expressed this idea of woman’s right and duty to tell herself in “A Keynote to *Keynotes*” (1893), where she notes that “there was only one small plot left for her to tell: the terra incognita of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her – in a word, to give herself away, as man had given himself away in his writings” (1). This reminds one of Helene Cixous’s appeal to women to write in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, where she says that “woman must write woman. And man, man” (2041). This categorical exhortation does resonate with Egerton’s own statement, yet I believe that, at a time when men were still allowed a freedom of speech that women were not, the examination of “man writing woman” remains pertinent and useful as part of an exposition of female sexuality in literature. While they can be seen as part of a patriarchal controlling of the female subject, I believe these male representations can also be seen, and especially when considered in conjunction with female-authored texts, as part of a collective effort to understand female sexuality in a time of uncertainty and change. Thus, the masculine point of view takes on various forms:

\textsuperscript{39} Incidentally, this is very similar to a caricature of Sarah Grand which appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1901, which depicted her holding up a man with a needle pinned through him.
it is the point of view of the French male writers, as well as the male narrators used by the British New Woman authors. Inevitably, the comparison of the ways in which male and female authors enable woman to tell herself and man to watch and tell her shed light on each gender’s perception of female sexuality, as well as on what is thought to be the man’s position. How does woman feel and think of her sensuality? How does man believe she feels, and what does he believe her thoughts to be? Furthermore, are man’s perceptions about her merely reflections of and ways to satisfy his desire for her, or can they be considered an earnest endeavour to comprehend the complexity of her sexuality? Considering the sexual double standard of the time, do these representations verify a desire to keep a distinction between the asexual “lady” and the prostitute, or do they denote an understanding of a woman’s right to knowledge of sex, as well as pleasure, and, more importantly, choice? The period’s contradictory conception of women as creatures of instinct, yet responsible for the moral guardianship of the home, and of men as intellectual and full of sexual urges to be satisfied take the form of a pervasive preoccupation which sets passion (or desire, sexuality) against rationality (or thought, restraint). How is, therefore, sexual awakening represented?

Prior to the rise of Realism and Naturalism, as well as the later New Woman novels and short stories, French and British literature had imbued its heroines with Romantic influences, either in their characterisation or in the heroine’s own formation and expectations. How can readers forget Emma Bovary, yearning to be loved as in the Romantic novels she had favoured as a young girl? It is interesting to see how this idea of “love” is addressed in the later fictions my thesis deals with. If love becomes a way to justify or exculpate desire and sexuality, and therefore a product of culture, does it serve to elevate the female character from being perceived as
natural and “instinctive”? The contrast between the natural and the artificial was a common concern throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and female sexuality was itself key to this preoccupation. Whilst Heilmann identifies a reconciliation of the female character as a sexual being with the moralistic undertones present in some New Woman literature – “Grand […] explores the potential of sexual pleasure in women only to bracket it together with an appropriately developed sense of moral responsibility and the capacity for upholding a healthy balance between the two” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 35) – Richardson goes further and argues that the moral and social concerns of the New Woman converged in the representation of “eugenic love” in fictions which collapsed the “division between love (as poetry) and marriage (as sexual reproduction), urging that love was to be no more, and no less, than the rational reproduction of the species” (Richardson, *Love and Eugenics* 92).

In Ménie Muriel Dowie’s *Gallia* (1895), the novel’s eponymous heroine finds herself having to choose between “love or motherhood” (92). This choice delineates not only her own trajectory as a character, but also much of the New Women’s position on motherhood and reproduction. Gallia’s decision to privilege and choose her role as, and duty to be, a mother over her love or desire for an unsuitable partner is characteristic of the Rational Reproduction movement. I argue that the

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40 From “the [...] identification of femininity with artifice, exhaustion, and decadence” (Felski, *The Counter Discourse of the Feminine* 1095), to concerns about the negative influence of the city, or even ideas about Dress Reform, opposing “the pleasures of ‘authentic’ [...] to the pains of ‘artificial’ femininity” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 28), ideas about the natural and the artificial were pervasive.

41 “In eugenic love, the flesh should submit to the spirit in order to contribute to racial progress; pleasure is overshadowed and undercut by the imperative of (re)production” (Richardson, “The Eugenization of Love: Sarah Grand and the Morality of Genealogy” 230).

42 The Rational Reproduction movement appeared in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1883, Francis Galton (1822 – 1911), Charles Darwin’s cousin, published *Inquiries into Human Faculty*...
opposition of love, or even passion, to motherhood, is found in the eugenic feminist
texts of the British fin de siècle, and also in novels, both in Britain and in France,
which lack such an agenda. Zola’s *Une Page d’Amour* (1877) and Maupassant’s
“L’Inutile Beauté” (1890) are just two examples of earlier, “non-eugenic” texts where
the quest for an understanding of female sexuality is built on definitions and
appraisals of the woman’s reproductive function. Critics and cultural historians
working on the Victorian period have written on what Foucault famously termed the
relegation of the sexual to the “sérieux de la fonction de se reproduire” (10)\(^4\), and
the anxiety caused by the New Woman’s menace to the family and / or the “race”\(^4\).
It is indeed the interrogation of the relationship between the sexual and the
reproductive which is at heart of many of the complexities and anxieties surrounding
female sexuality at the time. It is clear that “motherhood presented a vexing double
bind for the New Woman: adherence to this proper Victorian role relegated her to the
stifling private sphere, while a resistance to or reinterpretation of that role
transformed her into a disruptive anomaly” (Murphy 45). It is precisely the
reinterpretation of the role of the mother as coexisting with the sexual, sensual

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\(^{4}\) *and Its Development*, in which he coined the term “eugenics”, which he defined as “the conditions
under which men of a high type are produced” (n.p.). Eugenics was the science of selective human
breeding and reproduction. At the close of the century, many feminists started using the language and
ideas of eugenics. This new “science” relied heavily on the significance of reproduction, enabling
these feminists to place women’s ability to bear children, and to select their partners with a view to
forward the race at the forefront of their concerns. Writers like Grand or Dowie represented questions
of Rational Reproduction in their fiction, with the “intention to educate women eugenically through the
\(^{4}\) “Serious function of reproduction” (Foucault, Trans. Hurley 9-10).

\(^{4}\) Much has been written about this, both in the fields of cultural history and literary criticism. The
periodical press often portrayed the New Woman as an icon of “the dangers of sexual degeneracy,
the abandonment of motherhood, and consequent risk to the racial future of England” (Ledger and
Luckhurst xviii). “Associations with religious values and with women’s moral guardianship polarised
perceptions of a female sexuality awakened principally by the procreative urge and a male sexuality,
active, dominant, and powerful” (Levine 129). The erroneous perceptions and representations of the
New Woman meant that “women’s socio-sexual deviance was generally described almost exclusively
in terms of the New Woman’s supposed rejection of motherhood: female reproduction rather than
female sexuality was the main issue in debate” (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* 29), yet,
as in *Gallia*, for example, motherhood was in reality often represented as a woman’s main duty, only
chance of happiness, or even as an alternative to sexual satisfaction and / or love.
woman that is the focus of much of my analysis. What emerges from both the French and British fiction is not only the possibility and significance of non-reproductive sexuality, but, much more importantly, the concept of an interdependence of the erotic and the reproductive. Zola and Maupassant dare to show unconventional and imperfect forms of motherhood in the representation of incestuous stepmothers, sick children, sisters who act as mothers to their orphaned brothers, etc. The New Woman focuses on a more eugenic representation of motherhood, in which the duty to “forward the race” takes precedence. For many New Women, “romantic love was being recast along biological lines” (Richardson, “The Eugenization of Love” 230)45, yet it seems to me that a radical, albeit in most cases, unwitting, advocacy of the need for an acceptance of the “lover-and-mother” woman, one who would not have to choose between motherhood and love (or passion, or sexuality), transpires in some of these fictions. In any case, sexuality is often re-evaluated in light of the significance of motherhood. One of the questions that arise here is that, if motherhood was no longer to be the sole object of sex, or an obstacle impeding a woman’s enjoyment of a full sexual life and awareness, what was it that differentiated her from man? The idea of choice is at the centre of these matters: at the time, for example, many women characters are shown to be unaware of the implications of marriage. It is the man who chooses, and the female character is thus often pursued, and sometimes eventually “captured” by the man, yet his closeness to her often reveals a reality previously unknown to him. Her lack of awareness means that it is only once she has agreed to marry that she discovers the qualities (or faults) of a husband in the man. Furthermore, she moves from a desirable sexual object to a real person, and this reality de-objectifies her. The opinion that “realism often

45 Moreover, for Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, whose work La Femme et L’Eros chez Zola focuses on the representation of female sexuality as fatal in her analysis of the author’s early works, Zola himself often conceived of pregnancy or motherhood as a form of expiation from the the “original sin” (21).
appears as a genre that does not account adequately for women’s experiences in
the world [and that] some forms, especially naturalism, may lead to even further
objectification of women and their bodies” (Youngkin 15) is a common one. On the
opposite spectrum, New Woman literature is widely considered to enable the female
character to embody “a new departure in femininity: a subject, not an object”
(Richardson, *Women Who Did* xxxiii). In my work, I demonstrate how comparing the
perceived objectification found in the French works with the de-objectifying of the
female characters in New Woman literature strengthens the assertion that she was,
undeniably, becoming a subject in both mid- to late- nineteenth century French and
British literature.

Two themes which take on a major significance in my work are marriage and
prostitution. They embody one of the most important dichotomies of the Victorian
era, that of the “Angel in the house” and the whore. Furthermore, they represent the
two statuses through which a woman of the period could (or did) enter into a sexual
relationship with a man. The work of Friedrich Engels and Simone de Beauvoir is
the basis for my analysis of these two “institutions” and their imbrication in the
discussion of female sexuality. There is a blurring of boundaries between the wife
and the whore in France that brings forth many considerations about class. The
prevalent opinion at the time was that a strong sexuality was to be found and
considered the norm in women of the lower classes, but that it was a sign of
degeneracy and hysteria as soon as it was found in the middle classes. My work
explores the shattering of class systems through the medium of female sexuality,
and particularly in the work of Zola. This is, in fact, one of the most important

46 In the section “On Family” in *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and the
sections on “The Married Woman” and “Prostitutes and Hetaeras” in *The Second Sex* (1949),
respectively.
elements of the similarity between the French and the British in their concern with
the more sociological aspects surrounding the “Woman Question”.

One of the central aspects of the “Woman Question” was a questioning of
sexuality. Since the publication of Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976),
what had until then been the common view of Victorian, and, more generally, of the
nineteenth century, as a period which was reserved and prudish about sexuality has
changed dramatically. Foucault shed light on the number of discourses about sex
that were actually taking place at the time. One of the most important discursive
expositions of sexuality was the emerging field of sexology. As Sally Ledger and
Roger Luckhurst have noted, “in English culture, the 1880s and 1890s can be seen
as a moment of intensification of this sexual mapping” (291). Sexology developed in
Britain, Europe and North America from the 1870s, yet the term “sexology” was not
coined until the early twentieth century (Bland and Doan 2). This new “science of
sex” was the study of sexuality and its manifestations. Its major exponents were the
German psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing and, in Britain, Henry
Havelock Ellis47. The work that is considered as the first treatise on sexology is
Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), in which he catalogued the different
kinds of sexual drives. His opinion was that sexuality should have a primarily
procreative purpose, resulting in the cataloguing of all non-procreative sexual urges
as perverse. This was a common view at the time, and the discourses of sexology
propelled a plethora of new “types” of sexually perverted characters: these were the
“invert” (a term coined by Havelock Ellis to designate homosexuals), the lesbian, the
nymphomaniac, the hysterical, the narcissist, the masochist, the sadist, etc. At the
centre of all the debates on the (im)proprieties of sexual conduct were women. This

47 Havelock Ellis was well-acquainted with Zola’s work. He translated *Germinal* into English in 1894,
and wrote an article about the French novelist for the *Savoy*, in which he “appeared to applaud the
disgusting Zola for those very failings which outlawed him from all decent English homes” (Brome 90).
was a time heavily influenced by a strong sexual double standard: thus, men were considered to be naturally prone to sexual urges, while the general consensus was that women were, in essence, sexless. A woman thought to have a stronger desire than this imaginary norm was thus immediately pathologised as a nymphomaniac, or a hysterical; this preponderant sexual desire was, furthermore, considered as harmful to her partner. However, if she did not exhibit enough of a sexual awareness within the marital sphere, she was labelled a frigid woman, and, this too, was harmful, in other ways, to her partner. What emerges from most sexological treatises is the idea that women’s sexuality would always, no matter which camp it happened to fall into, be considered problematic and dangerous. Thus, numerous works flourished during that time, some of which tended more towards the medical/psychiatric approach, while others took the form of advice manuals. While I do not focus extensively on the issues of sexology, as my concern is in literature, I will, throughout

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48 This sexual double standard shaped and was inscribed into marriage law. In Britain, in 1857, “a wife’s right to present a petition for [divorce on the grounds of] adultery [was limited] to cases in which her husband ‘ha[d] been guilty of incestuous adultery, or of bigamy with adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality’” (Bonfield 118). On the other hand, husbands had a right to petition for divorce if they suspected their wives of any kind of adultery, reinforcing the idea that men’s sexual instincts should be, in the case of non-aggravated adultery, tolerated, while they could never be accepted in the case of women. In France, the situation was more complex: “in 1782, […] France passed divorce laws that made divorce possible by mutual consent, and – if one spouse resisted – for a wide range of reasons. This was by far the most liberal legislation in Europe, and that which came closest to the ideal of a relationship based on love. […] By 1803, divorce had already been made more difficult […], and in 1816 the […] government completely abolished it as one of the evils of revolution” (Ehmer 285). However, when the ability to apply for divorce was reinstated, in 1884, the French laws were less harsh on women than in Britain. Although one could not petition for divorce on the grounds of mutual consent, it was possible to do so “on the grounds of violence cruelty, serious insult, criminal conviction and adultery. Prosecution was open to the aggrieved […] husband or wife, on an equal basis” (Bonfield 141). Interestingly, this ability to petition for divorce because of adultery is portrayed in Maupassant’s story “Sauvée” (published in 1892, eight years after the passing of the law on divorce), in which a young woman hires a maid to seduce her husband in order for her to “discover” them making love and to be able to get a divorce.

49 Auguste Debay, for example, claimed that “it is as dangerous to suppress the genital instinct as to give it free reign” (175). William Acton stated that “lack of sexual feeling in the female [was] not an uncommon cause of apparent of temporary impotence in the male” (177).

50 Such is the case with Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis’s works, but also others such as Gustave Bouchereau’s Dictionary of Psychological Medicine (1892), or William Acton’s The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs (1857).

51 This was the case of, for example, some sections of Auguste Debay’s Hygiene et Physiologie du Mariage (1849), Nicolas Venette’s earlier Bréviaire de l’Amour dans le Mariage (1754), or Dr. Désormeaux’s L’Amour Conjugal (1907).
the thesis, be referring sporadically to such works in order to shed light on contemporary views on sexuality by the first researchers of sex.

The most significant contribution my thesis makes to the fields of Victorian and French studies is its analysis of two distinct, yet, as becomes increasingly clear in my analyses, thoroughly intertwined “groups” of writers. My comparative approach to the two literatures thus becomes a study in dichotomies, in every sense of the word. As Ann Ardis argues, New Women “challenge not only the bourgeois Victorian social order’s prescriptive definition of ‘correct’ female behaviour but also the pattern of thinking in hierarchically organised binary oppositions that puts men against women, ‘good’ women against ‘fallen’ ones” (27). I would add that they also put the lover against the mother, the lover against the wife, etc. On the other hand, as Naomi Schor notes, “realism is that paradoxical moment in Western literature when representation can neither accommodate the Otherness of woman nor exist without it” (Breaking the Chain xi). The processes by which the “One” sees and represents the “Other”, but also by which the “One” believes to be perceived by the “Other” are a major concern in my work, as it is through these very processes that the image of the subjective woman emerges. It is important to note that these are processes of othering, rather than reifications of the other. De Beauvoir’s use of the “Other” is central to Le Deuxième Sexe. In it, she develops and modifies the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic by replacing the terms with the “sujet”, the subject, and the “autre”, the other, where the first is man, and the latter, woman. While man is the point of reference, woman is inessential, and is defined by him accordingly. The idea of woman as “Other”, but also of “French as Other”, of “feminist as Other”, in short, the concept of needing to define female sexuality in terms of otherness and / or binary oppositions, and, much more significantly, the strength of the blurring of these
ideas that transpires from my comparison of the French and British works is at the heart of my original approach to these texts.

The first chapter, “Women as (reasoning?) animals”, focuses on the importance of the complexities of female sexuality and the emergence of a discourse on desire in a selection of works which span the period from 1867 to 1895. The texts I have chosen to illustrate this process are Émile Zola’s La Curée (1872), Une Page d’Amour (1874), Au Bonheur des Dames (1883) and Thérèse Raquin (1867), Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins (1893), Ménie Muriel Dowie’s Gallia (1895), and Victoria Cross’s short piece “Theodora: A Fragment” (1895). The chapter begins the thesis, and highlights the significance of the mind and the pervasive struggle between rationality and abandonment, between desire and duty, which permeate these fictional renditions of female eroticism. Motherhood takes on a central role in all issues surrounding female sexuality and desire, in works which discuss issues such as rational reproduction or the transmission of hereditary defects. As the thesis’s first chapter, it begins to elucidate some of the key issues at play in the representations of female sexuality in both countries, and sheds light on the centrality of the feminine question to these works. In doing so, it investigates the reasons for and effects of the more overtly and aesthetically sexualised image of woman that is found in the earlier French texts.

“Le Réveil et l’Éveil Sexuel”, the second chapter, focuses on the significance of female sexual awakening in the fiction of Sarah Grand, Ménie Muriel Dowie, George Egerton, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. The idea that “le mariage traditionnel est loin de créer les conditions les plus favorables à l’éveil et

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52 I use the term “feminine” here instead of “woman”, because the expression “Woman Question” denotes an active engagement with issues that were being debated at the end of the century in Britain. I am, instead, referring to questions relating to the feminine gender and sex that were being addressed both by New Woman writers as part of a commitment to the feminist project, and by French male authors who did not have such an agenda.
l’épanouissement de l’érötisme traditionnel” (Beauvoir II, 242)\textsuperscript{53} is what generally brings together the French and British literature of the period, resulting in the articulation of a complex, yet common, discourse on female sexual awakening and subjectivity. The significance of the common features surrounding these issues ultimately demonstrates that two currents which have commonly been regarded as opposing were in reality anticipating and mirroring each other in many aspects. The figure of the wife, a key component of one of the most significant dichotomies central to this thesis – the wife and the whore – takes on a central role in my analyses.

The third chapter, entitled “The Desire to Control Female Sexual Autonomy”, examines the issues surrounding the representation of female sexuality and the theme of prostitution. The parallelisms between marriage and prostitution were many during the nineteenth century. However, while the use of prostitution as a theme was widespread in the French fiction of the period, New Woman texts, although deeply invested in the issues surrounding it, were less prone to such an explicit recourse to the prostitute as a character, for example. Here, I examine the more pronounced division between a more aestheticised depiction in France and one that is more concerned with social reform issues in Britain. Using the erotic as a vehicle for social analysis, the masculine agent clearly emerges as a primary focus in both cultures. This chapter examines these issues in Zola’s *Nana* (1880), Huysmans’ *Marthe* (1876) and Goncourt’s *La Fille Elisa* (1877), as well as Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897).

The fourth chapter, “Un Air de Reine Cruelle”, examines a selection of short stories by Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Vernon Lee, Sarah Grand and Victoria Cross. The fantastic, or “near-fantastic” quality of these pieces allows for a more

\textsuperscript{53} “Traditional marriage is far from creating the most favourable conditions for the awakening and thriving of female sexuality”.
narrow focus on female sexuality as male anxiety, whether it is expressed by the French male authors, or the male narrators used in the British texts, and therefore giving more insight into the male gaze. I discuss the ways in which, as a “disguised symbol”, the female character manages to provide a means to voice the contemporary debates on female emancipation and the demand to enter the public sphere. The thesis ends on this departure from the other chapters, in its analysis of fantastic pieces. The possibilities that this more inventive genre allows the writers my thesis deals with enable my work to show how the representations of female sexuality during this period could also venture into more open spaces, and address serious, pertinent matters in fiction that also allowed flights of the imagination.
Chapter One | Women as (Reasoning?) Animals: Female Sexuality in the Work of Zola, Maupassant, Grand, and Cross

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Fig. 5. Édouard Manet. *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*. 1863. Oil on canvas.

At the time of its exhibition at the Salon des Refusés in 1863, Édouard Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* “drew serious and considered commentary”, instantly becoming a *succès de scandale* (Singletary 49). The painting became the subject of numerous debates. The naked woman in the painting is virtually at the centre of it: she is also the first element we notice. She sits calmly with two men, who are talking, and one of them seems to be pointing at her. Perhaps the men are discussing her, yet she is not looking at the men, but out of the painting, at us. She is aware of their presence and of their words, and is not ashamed about her lack of clothing. In *Mes Haines* (1866), Zola analysed the painting, and lamented that “cette femme nue a scandalisé le public, qui n’a vu qu’elle dans [la] toile [de Manet]” (386). However, it is inevitable to admit that one of the work’s most striking features is, indeed, the fact that the woman is not wearing any clothes. This is in stark contrast to both the men with her, and to the woman in the background. There is much discussion, in art criticism, of the difference between the concepts of “naked” and “nude”. Lynda Nead differentiates the two by emphasising the realistic qualities of the first, which are opposed to the more purely representational ones of the

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54 The Salon des Refusés, or “Salon of the Rejected”, was an exhibition of the works rejected by the Salon de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris. The most famous exhibition at the Refusés was probably the one which took place in 1863, in which Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* and American painter James McNeill Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* gained notoriety.

55 It is also featured in Zola’s 1886 novel *L’Oeuvre*, although my work does not analyse it.

56 “That naked woman scandalised the public, who could not see past her in [Manet’s] painting.”
second: “nakedness is a mark of material reality; whereas nudity transcends that historical and social existence and is a kind of cultural disguise” (*The Female Nude* 16). There are several elements in the painting which qualify the woman’s lack of clothing as nakedness, in opposition to a more “ideal” (Nead, *The Female Nude* 14) nudity. The woman’s clothing has been left to one side: we can, in fact, see her blue dress on the left side of the painting. Furthermore, she is also sitting on what appear to be some of her own clothes. These are details which highlight the realism of the scene: she is not an idealised female figure, but a real woman who has taken off her clothes, perhaps after bathing in the nearby river, and has used some of them to sit on, instead of sitting directly on the grass. Her body and sexuality are laid bare for the men to scrutinise, and her sensuality is, in part, suggested by the basket of fruits and bread that are strewn over her discarded clothing.

Manet’s painting brings together several of my own concerns in this first chapter, in which I will focus on an overview of the French and British authors’ representations of female sexuality, by very much drawing attention to the female characters in the works. For Nancy Armstrong, “the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality, and the history of sexuality is also constructed in the pages of fiction” (9). While New Woman literature shocked its contemporaries by placing sexuality at the centre of its concerns, in France, Zola was similarly frequently attacked for his frank sexual depictions. In his review of the 1890s, Holbrook Jackson insists that the innovations happening at the turn of the century in Britain were a mere echo of what had been happening in the rest of Europe for a couple of decades (159). In this chapter, I will begin to show how the same questions were being addressed in both New Woman and French fiction. If these fictions can seem, at first glance, rather different in their approaches to the
representation of female sexuality, I will show how a recurrence of similar themes and preoccupations actually sheds light on the common concerns and aims of these authors. I will be considering a selection of novels by Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant and Sarah Grand, as well as a short story by Victoria Cross. This chapter differs from those following it, in that it sets the basis for my analysis of the French and British texts. As such, it relies more heavily on close readings of the works I discuss, in order to gain an understanding of the main issues and themes arising in both literatures. The concerns that arise from this chapter are also addressed in subsequent chapters, and as such form the focus of my thesis. I will address these in several stages, focussing on themes which are found in the works the chapter analyses. The sexualisation of the female character, the male gaze, the opposition of reflection and sensation, the contrasting discourses of love and desire, and the relationship between desire and motherhood.

**Sexualising the Female Character**

In an atmosphere that valued female passionlessness, in a society constantly striving to deny a woman’s sexuality, why does the sensually aware, and sometimes fully sexualised, female character constantly appear as a recurring feature in New Woman and French literature between 1850 and 1900? The increasing significance of the role of sexology in monitoring and classifying female sexual behaviour resulted in a multiplicity of (sometimes dissonant) voices in the common endeavour to understand women’s sexuality. As Stephen Garton observes,

> There were debates, disputes and differences of opinion over questions such as the need for orgasm to ensure conception, the physical and mental effects of masturbation, the existence of female
passion, the desirability of regular “sexual congress”, and causes of venereal disease and the capacity of men to exercise sexual restraint. 

[...] [M]edical and moral advice literature was widely disseminated. 

(119) 

Why did these authors feel that it was necessary to assert the sexual nature of women? What is it that brings these depictions together? As we shall see, despite the inevitable differences between, for example, Sarah Grand and Émile Zola’s manner of depicting female sexuality, the fact remains that the presence of sexuality is, in a way that mirrors their contemporary cultural and scientific landscape, a major feature in these fictions. I will begin answering the questions I have asked by acknowledging the presence of a strong female sexual self in the two literatures. In Zola’s novels, “sex is privileged [...] not only because it is a central preoccupation of the Second Empire society he describes, but also because it is the means by which the Rougon-Macquart family, and thus the novel cycle, can progress” (Thompson 53-4). New Woman fiction, on the other hand, was more heterogeneous in its approach to sexuality, but also within the fiction of Grand herself, in what Ann Heilmann terms the “self-contradictory nature of [her] feminism” (New Woman Strategies 57). Grand’s novels attribute an importance to sexuality that becomes twofold, revolutionary in its claims (when she portrays women as the regenerators of the race), yet also complying with many of the time’s assumptions about women (for example, in her belief in the idea of women as guardians of Victorian morality).57 

In both literatures, the sexuality of female characters is shaped through a questioning of women’s sexual instincts and the significance to be attributed to them;

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57 Heilmann writes that “by using motherhood as a metaphor for women’s right to dictate moral standards and assume public power, feminists exploded the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres, but they also reinforced biological beliefs in the essential difference between the sexes which underpinned this ideology” (The Late-Victorian Marriage Question 1.xxii).
in the fiction of the period, this was a recurring concern. The shaping of women’s sexuality was complex at the time: far from being considered merely as a “natural” instinct in the dominant discourses of sexology, for example, it was also said to be inextricably linked to women’s position in society. During the second half of the nineteenth century, “‘ignorant’ married women were said to be leading unfulfilled lives of idleness and boredom” (Rowold xi). Unless they belonged to the working class, women were not usually in employment. The restriction of work for women was, for example, a major concern of Sarah Grand’s, who considered work to be essential to their physical health and mental well-being. Let us consider, therefore, the problem of sexuality in its relation to work. Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), the eleventh volume in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, focuses on the rise of the department store which gives the novel its title, after a young woman named Denise Baudu moves to Paris with her two little brothers to find work and becomes an employee there. Denise develops a relationship with Octave Mouret, the owner of the store, which will end with his proposal of marriage at the end of the novel. Zola attributes great significance to her work and social position within the novel. While “feminists like Grand pointed out that what drove women mad was not the absence of sex, but the lack of a meaningful occupation” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 75), giving an educational and professional solution to hysteria and degeneration, Zola, on the contrary, saw sex as the source of these problems, aligning himself more closely to the opinion of sexologists. In addition, there was also a prevalent concern, in both countries, about the compatibility of the traditional notions of femininity and work. In 1860, French legislator Jules Simon went so far as to declare that “une femme qui se met à travailler n’est pas une femme” (Scott 420).  

58 “A woman who sets out to work is not a woman”.

my focus is on the relationship between occupation and a satisfying sexuality, I will not be examining the conditions of work, or the legislative aspect of the female presence in the workplace, but will, rather, focus on the way in which the character of Denise’s occupation sheds light on these issues.

The social position as a “shopgirl” was paid great attention during the long nineteenth century, due to the novelty of the “department store.” The shopgirl was a problematic figure, as “[her] gender set [her] apart from the men besides whom [she] worked, [resulting in] the consequent sexualisation of [her] role within the store” (Sanders 88). Tissot’s The Shop Girl is extremely interesting in its presentation of its subject-matter. The use the painter makes of the gaze here brings forth many questions which also apply to the contemporary situation of the shopgirl, as well as the representation of this figure in Zola’s novel.

Fig. 6. James Tissot. The Shop Girl. 1885. Oil on canvas.

In the painting, we can see a man looking through the window: we suppose he is looking at the goods on display, yet, he is also looking at the shopgirl who is on the left. This raises ideas about the shopgirl herself as goods, and seems to confirm

59 Joan Scott’s “La Travailleuse” explores the correlation between industrialisation and the sexual division of labour. Her essay also addresses the contemporary questions arising from previous perceptions of the woman’s work and production as relegated to the home and reproduction.
80 See Lise Shapiro Sanders’s Consuming Fantasies for more examples of shopgirls in literary works between 1880 and 1920.
61 Zola famously modelled the eponymous department store in Au Bonheur des Dames on Paris’s Au Bon Marché, publishing his novel 31 years after the creation of the store. In Consuming Fantasies, Lise Shapiro Sanders traces the history of the grands magasins, interestingly highlighting the significance of France in shaping the dazzling, ostentatious department store, as it is seen in Zola’s novel. “These stores emerged in conjunction with the industrialisation of urban locales in the North of England in the 1830s and 1840s. […] The early department stores […] reflected and reproduced the ideology of caution and thrift […] which defined the middle-class household. […] By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the formation of the department store in England began to be impacted by the development of the Parisian grands magasins […] as splendid monuments to display aesthetics and consumption” (60).
Sanders’s description of the problematic nature of her sexualisation within the store. Furthermore, the woman at the centre of the picture is holding the door open and looking outside the painting at us, constructing us as customers too. In this case, her sexualisation becomes even more interesting, and poses questions regarding the gendered identity of the customer. If the shopgirls are “goods”, then what is the implied sex of the customer? And, furthermore, is the painting intended for any particular sex? These questions also arise in Zola’s novel, and particularly through the medium of class depiction: Bouthemont, the man responsible for purchases for the store, defines the shopgirl’s equivocal status as “entre la boutiquière et la dame” (364)\(^62\), situating her “above” the working-class woman, yet not quite on the same level as the women who constitute the store’s clientele. With this statement, Bouthemont is implying that she is not of too low a class for men such as himself or Mouret to consider seducing, but also that, because she is not a lady, she might be easier to seduce than one. In keeping with the contemporary, somewhat hypocritical, associations of working-class women as sexually uninhibited, and higher-class women as “ladies”, Bouthemont’s declaration not only seeks to define and label Denise’s sexuality, but situates her in an undefined, sexual no-man’s land of neither promiscuity nor virtue, almost inciting his interlocutor to seduction, in order to ascertain it. Incidentally, the promiscuous category of the *boutiquière* is precisely Thérèse Raquin’s own position, which I will be discussing in more depth later. Denise, in contrast with most of the female characters populating the *Rougon-Macquarts*, comes across as a very sensible, almost entirely pure, young woman. Despite living in a milieu in which promiscuity abounds, and, more significantly, despite the repeated advances of Mouret, owner of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, she

\(^62\) “Between the shopkeeper and the lady” – note that *boutiquière*, shopkeeper, is here intended as a woman who works in a small shop, as opposed to a department store.
remains true to her own ideas until the end of the novel, in which we are led to believe she will finally marry him. It seems that, in his construction of Denise, Zola was somehow anticipating the idea of the hard-working, independent woman almost as an antidote to degeneration. In addition, Denise’s motherly qualities, which are repeatedly shown in the care of her brothers, highlight the similarities between her attitude and one which Sarah Grand herself would have approved of. However, the difference between Grand and Zola’s vision seems to lie in the latter’s desire to enable Denise to reach sexual plenitude. It seems fair to say that the relationship between her and Octave is not only based on an intellectual, or mental, understanding, but also on a strong sexual attraction. Grand’s heroines, on the other hand, are shown finding meaningful occupations, yet never in conjunction with a full sexual life.

While Denise is a working woman, the eponymous heroine’s situation in Thérèse Raquin (1867) is less clear. This novel did not belong to the Rougon-Macquart cycle, but Zola wrote it with the experimental method in mind (as I have noted in the Introduction, the preface to its second edition is one of the texts in which the author outlines his credo). Thérèse is married to her cousin Camille, works in her aunt’s shop, and is in the same undefined “category” as Denise: she is not a working-class woman, but is not a lady, either. However, the fact that the shop lacks a sustained clientele means that she does not have to work very hard, and spends her days sitting at the counter with nothing to do. In La Curée (1872), Renée, its protagonist, is a rich young lady married to a prominent speculator: she does not work, and spends her days visiting friends, buying expensive dresses, and going to the Bois de Boulogne. In Une Page d’Amour (1874), Hélène is a young widow who does not work, and divides her time between the care of her sick daughter, visiting
neighbours, and going to the church. Renée, Hélène, and Thérèse are idle women who seem to suffer that (in)famous maladie du siècle: an example is Zola’s presentation of Renée at the beginning of the novel, in which she complains “je m’ennuie à mourir” (14). Thérèse suffocates in the little dark shop in which she is forced to spend her days, and the discovery of sexuality in the arms of her husband’s friend Laurent fills her days. This brings Zola close to Grand’s vision of the need for women to have a purpose in life: on the part of the woman, is the affair between Thérèse and Laurent simply a matter of distraction? Renée has tried everything and is satiated with the pleasures and luxuries of her rich life. Hélène spends her days sewing in front of the window; she has recently moved to Paris and feels alienated and frightened of a city she does not know. Sexuality thus becomes an escape, the only way to find solace is in sexual satisfaction. Renée begins a sordid affair with her stepson, and Hélène becomes involved with her neighbour, a married man who is also her daughter’s physician. The result of this is, however, a perceived stronger sexuality in women than men, yet, as de Beauvoir argues,

Il faut bien qu’elle tue le temps […] La chair ne crie pas plus fort chez [la femme] que chez le mâle: mais elle en épie les moindres murmures et les amplifie: la volupté, […] c’est le foudroyant triomphe de l’immédiat; […] en dehors de la flambée charnelle, ce qu’il y a n’est rien; pendant cette brève apothéose, elle n’est plus mutilée ni frustrée.

(II, 485)

In Une Page d’Amour, when Hélène, consumed by guilt, confesses her affair to the Abbé Jouve, he tells her that her idleness has “ouvert la porte aux rêveries

63 “I am bored to death”.
64 “She has to find a way to kill time […] Flesh is not more important for the woman than it is for the man: but she looks out for its slightest murmurs and amplifies them: sensuality […] is the devastating triumph of the immediate; there is nothing outside of the carnal blaze; during this brief apotheosis, she no longer feels mutilated or frustrated”.
dangerous (273). Indeed, frustration and an increasing sense of immanence, to use de Beauvoir’s terminology, drives these female characters to elaborate a strong “aesthetisation of sexuality” (Felski, The Gender of Modernity 178). According to de Beauvoir, “[l]a femme est, dit-on, sensuelle, elle se vautre dans l’immanence; mais d’abord on l’y a enfermée” (II, 485). Zola depicts the character of Renée in La Curée by highlighting both the ideas of a lack of purpose, of boredom, and of a perceived refinement of the sensual when she admits that “quand je m’ennuie et que je commets le péché de rêver l’impossible, je suis sûre de trouver des choses beaucoup plus jolies […] C’est une affaire d’éducation” (La Curée 209). This is an idea that emphasises the character’s belief that there is an element of creativity in sexuality and in the erotic. She is not simply content to have an affair, but attempts to do so in a beautiful way – as we shall see, the descriptions of her sexual encounters are highly stylised, and filled with images of the natural and the artificial, for example.

A similar idea is expressed by Grand in Ideala (1888):

There was danger […] in the over-education of the senses, which made their ready response inevitable, but neither limited the subjects, nor regulated the degree, to which they should respond. But it would be hard […] to say where cultivation of love for the beautiful should end, and to determine the exact point at which the result ceases to be intellectual and begins to be sensual. (260)

In both the French and British works which are considered in this chapter, the ideas of education, sexuality and beauty are often found in conjunction with descriptions of women as sexual predators. In “Theodora: A Fragment” (1895), a

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65 “Opened the door to dangerous rêveries”.
66 “Woman is said to be sensual, to wallow in immanence; but this is the result of her imprisonment within it”.
67 “When boredom pushes me to dream of the impossible, I am sure to find much pleasanter things […]. It’s a question of education”.
short story in which a man, Cecil Ray, narrates his fascination with a woman, and his encounters with her, Victoria Cross enables the story’s focus to shift between the depiction of a very sexualised and, at least in the narrator’s eyes, manipulative woman and the man’s selfish and thoroughly egotistical conception of his desire for her. His thoughts do not centre themselves around his desired Theodora, but on himself: “I thought [...] more or less about Theodora, and mostly about the state of my own feelings” (21, my italics). Throughout the story, Cecil rigorously abides by his own theory, which says that “we love all objects in their relation to our own pleasure from them” (28). Similarly, despite it being her first sensual experience and the subsequent importance of Dark Essex in her life, Dowie emphasises the eponymous heroine in Gallia’s (1895) self-centredness. Gallia falls in love with this man, and, during one of their meetings, the reader is told that “his head was bent and she could not see his face, but she did not care to, she was occupied with her own feelings” (47). The discovery of sensuality thus becomes an opportunity for introspection, the women looking inwards as they are confronted with the male gaze.

The Male Gaze

One of the most problematic issues when comparing the French and British literature is the idea of the male gaze. As I said in my introduction, the masculine point of view is a defining feature of these representations of sexuality. While male French authors needed to negotiate their own desiring gaze with the naturalist or realist need for objectivity, New Women also had to face the problem of the masculine point of view when they used male narrators. De Beauvoir conceptualises the complexity of point of view when she reminds her reader that while popular opinion thinks of women as sexual, carnal creatures, men are not seen in this way
because there are no women to proclaim this truth (I, 244). This idea is useful to begin thinking about the influence of the masculine point of view in literature. The situation in the nineteenth century is more multifaceted than that which is described by de Beauvoir. Conflicting interests and opinions about women positioned them as ideally sexless, yet either potentially nymphomaniac or hysteric, and sexually voracious if they were working-class women. Men’s sexuality, on the other side, was seen as part of their nature, and a mere blemish one could turn a blind eye upon.68 Thus the interest in nineteenth-century depictions of sexuality is not to highlight that man, too, is a sexual being, but rather to affirm that woman is sexual herself. It was in the interest of both male and female writers to proclaim this truth. Yet, how were female beauty and seductiveness represented in both fictions, and what do the differences between male and female authors mean?

Appearance and beauty acquire a great significance for the male observers, but also for the women, who respond to the male gaze – “Theodora” crucially begins with a reflection on the significance of beauty. Beauty is necessary and conducive to desire, and several of the male characters in these works judge women purely on their physical appearance. One of the most significant characteristics of Cross’s short story is the way its male narrator’s desire influences his perception and presentation of Theodora. From her “soft scarlet lips” to the “seducing softness” (11) of her face, her features are seen from Cecil’s desiring perspective. In a similar manner, in Zola’s work “the appeal of women […] is heightened by detailed descriptions of their physical appearance, descriptions which are intended to seduce the (male) reader in the same way as the characters themselves are seduced” (Thompson 57). Interestingly, this is a point in which New Woman literature greatly

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68 This was reflected in the contemporary theories on female sexuality, and in the double standard which informed marriage law. See notes 48 and 49 in the Introduction for more on this.
differs from Zola’s: while the male reader is intended to be seduced by the characters in the naturalist novels, the New Woman fiction’s educational purpose does not allow for a similar seduction. In this case, the educational feminism of the New Woman novels remains the salient trait of the British fiction. Contrary to this, the male narrators, but also the male characters in Zola’s novels, as well as the masculinity of the author himself, all permeate the descriptions of women with men’s sensations and impressions. Women are thus often sexualised, for example, in depictions of clothing that reveal more of their nudity than their dress. In the following description from *La Curée*, in which Renée’s attire is described as she arrives at a party, her nudity under those clothes, and by extension her sexuality, are foregounded: “décolletée jusqu’à *la pointe des seins*, les bras *découverts* […] , la jeune femme semblait sortir toute *nue* de sa gaine de tulle et de satin, pareille à une […] *nymphe*” (32-3, my italics). Similarly, in *Notre Cœur* (1890), Maupassant conveys the male character Mariolle’s desire for the woman who will later become his lover, Mme de Burne, as she enters a room and greets him. She is described as wearing “une robe […] avec un col qui serrait le cou, des manches qui serraient les bras, un corsage qui serrait la gorge et la taille, une jupe qui serrait les hanches et les jambes” (*Notre Cœur* 471). Again, instead of concealing the female body, the male-authored descriptions of the female character’s clothing reveal the sensuality of their curves in a tantalising manner. The omniscient narrator and the men observing the women often come together in Zola’s descriptions: Renée’s arrival causes “un murmure d’admiration. Elle était vraiment divine” (*La Curée* 32), similarly to the eponymous heroine’s first appearance on stage in *Nana*. Using the male gaze

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69 “The plunging neckline touched the tips of her breasts, her naked arms […] , the young woman seemed to come out of her sheath of tulle and satin completely naked, just like a […] *nymphet*.”

70 “A dress with a neckline that tightened her neck, sleeves that tightened her arms, a corset that tightened her bust and waist, and a skirt that tightened her hips and legs.”

71 “Whispers of admiration. She truly looked divine.”
means that there is often an objectification of the female characters affected by it. This is an important element of the representation of female sexuality in “Theodora: A Fragment”. Despite thinking of Theodora as very clever, Cecil strongly omits any reference to her mind during their encounters, choosing instead to continuously refer to her body. This objectification of Theodora is highlighted in the conversation between Cecil and Digby, a friend of his, in which the latter proclaims that he “would have had her” himself (7, my italics), stressing the lack of consideration towards her own feelings or wishes, constructing her exclusively as a means for his own pleasure. Furthermore, Theodora’s body is also seen in light of its possible response to Cecil, who thinks about her “supple-looking waist” (18), for example. The fantasies of the male observer are thus conveyed within the description of the female character, resulting in unreliable depictions that are mediated by sexual desire. Interestingly, Cecil’s desire for Theodora approximates him to New Woman fiction’s female characters, who, as Laura Marcus argues, become “dreamer[s], turned inward to sensation and feeling” (145). Women’s bodies become a site within which masculine desires and fantasies are inscribed.

Furthermore, these female bodies become an opportunity to present a contrast between what the male narrator perceives and what is. “Theodora”’s Cecil repeatedly insists on things “seeming” to be the way he perceives them, the constant repetition of his supposition underlining the significance of his desire, and the resulting unreliability of his account of events. While Theodora might at first seem to be a very forward and seductive young woman, a closer look at the text reveals that such a notion might be orchestrated by the narrator’s habit of assigning most of her thoughts to her, in the same way that other narrators inscribe their desire onto the women’s physical descriptions. It is in fact Theodora’s looks that he constantly
interprets as full of desire, disappointment, longing, and even rage, thus effectively dominating not only the short story itself through his narrative presence, but her opinions too. This appropriation of thought positions the story’s account of desire within a distinctly masculine, patriarchal setting. Moreover, the narrator exacerbates what ultimately comes to be perceived as a thoroughly normative reproduction of gendered roles by constructing Theodora as a strongly sexual woman. The narrator deceives himself into believing he understands and can fully interpret her, in an attempt to appropriate “this irritating character” (31).

Cross’s short story’s use of internal focalisation is “fixed” throughout, with “everything pass[ing] through” (Genette 189) Cecil’s character. In Narrative Discourse, Gérard Genette maintains that internal focalisation is “rarely applied in a totally rigorous way” (192). While the narrator uses direct speech to reproduce the dialogues he has with Theodora, a closer look at his narration questions the exactitude of the words he attributes to the characters in his story. The fact that he quotes what he believes her to be thinking in the very same manner as what she says undermines the credibility of what is reported as her own speech. Moreover, Cecil’s reliability breaks down even further with his revelation of a possible awareness, on his part, of his own inability to be objective. He professes Theodora’s gaze to “speak so clearly” (25, my italics), yet proceeds to say that “it seem[s] to say…” (25, my italics). The contradictions between what the reader infers to be happening between the two characters, and Cecil’s narration of it, thus become the focal point of the story. As Gérard Genette argues, “[t]he narrator almost always ‘knows’ more than the hero, even if he himself is a hero, and therefore […] focalisation through the hero is a restriction of field just as artificial in the first person as in the third” (104). Can the narrator’s apparent understanding of Theodora’s inner
thoughts, of her glance, “full of demands, and questionings, and a very distinct assertion of distress” (18), be trusted, as he admits to being “hardly conscious of anything but her painful proximity” (26)? While his actions, thoughts, and narration push him towards her, his desire and sexual excitement giving momentum to the story, there are two instances in which his forward movement is brusquely interrupted. The first happens fairly early in the story, when Theodora asks him to move his chair off her dress. The contrast between his desire and her own concerns is exemplified in the way the text is similarly disjointed by the statement, “I pushed my chair back immediately and apologised” (12). Theodora’s only reactions to Cecil’s impulsive kiss at the end of the story are, according to him, a slight loss of balance, followed by a smile and a handshake. Such an ending reinforces the male narrator’s self-centredness: the story can, and does, end once he has achieved his aim, albeit partially.

In Grand’s Ideala, the novel’s main character, who gives the novel its title, is seen through the eyes of her friend Lord Dawne. In New Woman Strategies, Ann Heilmann notes the incongruity of Grand’s choice of “such an untrustworthy and essentially autocratic male voice for a text intended to exalt female autonomy” (57), and I believe that the answer lies in the reactions that are elicited from the female characters as a result of the desiring male gaze. The need to demonstrate a comprehension of the female mind is symptomatic of a time in which women were challenging all areas of life, and this threat could only be undermined by a deprecation of, and a simulation of possession of the thoughts which posed such a threat to the Victorian status quo. Furthermore, as Heilmann points out, this was

An activity whose phallic symbolism was well established by the end of the nineteenth century when […] dominant images and metaphors in
culture and art represented women as boxes (‘cases’ / case studies),
whose mystery could only be lifted if they were opened and penetrated,
with the writer’s pen, […], or the psychoanalyst’s gaze. (New Woman Strategies 70)

Dr Galbraith, who, in The Heavenly Twins, not only marries Evadne, but becomes her doctor, and therefore attempts to appropriate and possess her in every sense of the word, compares Evadne to the Lady of Shalott (586). This emphasises her longing for sensual satisfaction, her imprisonment within her loneliness during her time as Colquhoun’s wife. His gaze is therefore centred on an extremely sexualised vision of her even before their marriage, and his analysis of Evadne as a case study is all the more interesting if one considers how he first saw her, asleep and helpless, at her aunt’s house (169). The male gaze could therefore be seen as a violation of the female mind, a sexually charged forcing and dominance of the desired object.

The male gaze is commonly encountered in New Woman novels in scenes of seduction. In The Heavenly Twins, Sarah Grand opposes the character of the corrupt, syphilitic Mosley Menteith to Lord Kilroy in the depiction of their desire and its effect on their (future) wives, Edith and Angelica. During their courtship, Mosley looks at Edith “with animal eyes and a flush partly of gratified vanity on his face” (191, my italics), while Kilroy represses his desire to look at his wife, Angelica, in order to avoid offending her. Vanity within the observation of the desired woman is a prominent feature of such texts, Victoria Cross’s Cecil admitting that “it is difficult to reach our hearts or our sympathies, but our vanity is always available” (18). During her declaration to Dark Essex, Gallia’s voice sounds “rich, tender, beautiful, as [Dark himself] had never heard it” (Dowie 55). This is another instance of a man’s gratified vanity and the way in which it affects his perception of a woman. In The Heavenly
Twins, however, Lord Kilroy is described as much more wary of his demonstration of desire towards his wife, of “the carnal admiration for her person which she expected and despised” (478). In this case, Grand’s essentially conservative position regarding sexuality and male, as well as female, desire comes through extremely clearly. For social purists such as Grand, “women were morally superior to men” (C. Nelson, “Part II” 140), and the negative connotations of the undesired male gaze serve to highlight this.

Both Renée and Thérèse Raquin represent an interesting development of this theme, as they also have the ability to unveil themselves under the sexualised or desiring male gaze. The intimacy between man and woman takes on an extremely significant role in what effectively is an attempt to return to the established patriarchal and normative roles of society through the male possession of the female body and the understanding of the female mind which is presented as resulting from it. In the case of Thérèse, not only does her affair with Laurent finally enable her to awaken the “passion qui dormait dans sa chair assoupi” (Thérèse Raquin 27), but it also allows her to feel that she can communicate with another person for the first time. Furthermore, her hidden beauty reveals itself under Laurent’s eyes, his first impression of her opposing itself to the one he has during their encounters in her bedroom – “elle est laide, après tout. […] Elle a le nez long, la bouche grande. Je ne l’aime pas du tout” (50), “Laurent, étonné, trouva sa maîtresse belle […] Il n’avait

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72 Social purity was a strand of feminism that demanded a higher morality from men: their claim was that “public attention had to be shifted away from female morality (which was not a problem) to male sexuality (which was)” (Heilmann, The Late-Victorian Marriage Question 1.xxii). Because of their emphasis on the moral superiority of women, eugenic ideas were also often part of the social purity feminists’ discursive strategies. For them, men were “inincorrigible villains, and […] women [became the] heroic bearers of moral biology. […] Eugenic feminists stressed that males were sexually irresponsible: in fact, the eugenic need for women was predicated on this belief” (Richardson, The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact 186). Sarah Grand was a strong proponent of both social purist and eugenic ideas.

73 “Passion that slumbered in her sleepy flesh”.
jamais vu cette femme” (54). It is only during these encounters that Thérèse uncovers her beauty and her being, as during the dinners she returns to her old self: “il la trouvait grave, rechignée, le nez plus long, les lèvres plus minces. Elle était laide, revêche, inabordable. […] Elle jouait son ancien personnage” (63). In addition, this last sentence sheds light on the perceived malevolence and hypocrisy of Thérèse’s character, as it is through her own will that she becomes someone else. Renée, the “belle Madame Saccard”, on the other hand, reveals a different side to her lover Maxime, as it is through her possessiveness that her white hands feel like a claw on his shoulder (302). In her case, the predatory nature of the female character reveals itself to the man she loves through her jealousy and her flame-like desire for him. While it appears that Maxime’s perception of Renée during the sexual act is very much informed by his own construction of her, Thérèse’s case is less clear. Is it the liberating effect of her encounters with Laurent which prompts her to show a different side of herself, or is it Laurent’s desire which skews his perception of her? Again, it would appear that it is the men who inscribe meaning onto the female body, their interpretations defining the women.

The importance of beauty is re-evaluated in the context of the woman’s own needs and sexual desire. In Dowie’s novel, Gallia thinks of beauty rather than intelligence within the context of her desire for Dark Essex, her keen curiosity as to whom Dark favours as the prettiest girl in the room betraying her interest in him. Her desire for him prompts a yearning to be beautiful in order to have her feelings reciprocated. Yet this is in stark opposition to her “free mode of dress” (39), for example, which Dowie emphasises to be the opposite of the appearance of more

74 “She is ugly, after all. [...] She has a long nose, a big mouth. I don’t like her at all”, “Laurent, surprised, found his lover beautiful. [...] He had never seen this woman”.
75 “He found her grave, grimacing, her nose was longer, her lips, thinner. She was ugly, crabby, unapproachable. [...] She played her previous role”.


conventional young women her age. At a time when fashion was constantly re-modelling the female figure, the usage of the corset, for example, was considered by some as indicative of loose morals and promiscuity. Sarah Grand was a strong proponent of the Rational Dress movement: in The Heavenly Twins, a passage describing Mosley flirting with a young woman he sees from the window exemplifies the influence of appearance on men’s perception of women. This woman’s dress is slyly ridiculed by Grand, who declares her to be “known to her set as ‘stylish’” (279).

It is not merely in the depiction of this young girl that the interest of this passage resides, but in the way in which the episode sheds a negative light on both the man and woman, who seem to be playing a game of seduction; Grand writes that “he understood her tactics” (279, my italics). This passage overturns the concept of the sexless woman by associating a typical product of the fin de siècle, the “fashionable” young girl, and a degenerate man with “only the one interest in life” (279). The contrast between a sad and unhealthy Edith and the flirty, exuberant young woman walking on the beach, as well as the association of the latter with the syphilitic Mosley through their understanding of each other’s desires, enables a strong message of social purity to stem from this short, yet extremely significant passage.

While “historians agree that throughout the Victorian period the vast majority of women of all classes wore corsets” (Bayles Kortsch 56), “the corset was a topic of heated controversy. […] Discussion was often not on the discomfort it caused the women who wore them, but rather its effect on their health”, such as chest ailments, for example (Rifelj 243). In Britain, “those who chose not to wear corsets were typically associated with one of two movements, Rational […] or Aesthetic Dress” (Bayles Kortsch 77). Sarah Grand was a supporter of the Rational Dress movement, as evidenced in sections of The Heavenly Twins: in the chapter he narrates, Dr Galbraith, for example, puts forth the view that “the waist is an infallible index to the moral worth of a woman; very little of the latter survives the pressure of a tightened corset” (562). Although the Dress Reform societies’ “particular strength was reform underwear” (Bayles Kortsch 79), the corset was not the only piece of clothing that was rejected or discussed. Supporters of Rational Dress complained of the heavy, impractical skirts and dresses they were forced to wear (P. A. Cunningham 204), and “feminists added the complaint that their cumbersome clothes […] prevented women from participating in the public world” (P. A. Cunningham 204). Grand, for example, focussed on the dangerous effects of tight boots in her cautionary tale Two Dear Little Feet (1873).
This message is silently conveyed, giving great attention to the theme of appearance.

For de Beauvoir, the “dressed up” woman is a paradoxical cross between what is natural and artificial:

Dans la femme parée, la Nature est présente, mais captive, modelée par une volonté humaine selon le désir de l’homme. Une femme est d’autant plus désirable que la nature y est advantage épanouie et plus rigoureusement asservie: c’est la femme “sophistiquée” qui a toujours été l’objet érotique idéal. (I, 267)

Nature becomes “the raw material that must be tamed and controlled in order to answer [men’s] purposes and desires” (Kirby 29). This artificial idea of beauty is prominent in Cross’s story, where Cecil tells us how the “small collar of the dress opened at the neck, and [Theodora’s] throat rose […] like an almond bursting from its husk” (10), a description that emphasises his appreciation of a fabricated beauty in her. This character is explicit about his preference for the artificial: “I do not profess to admire the simple violet; I infinitely prefer a well-trained hothouse gardenia” (12).

Similarly, the character of Mme de Burne in Notre Cœur enables Maupassant to reflect on women’s beauty and seductive powers. The man who is in love with Mme de Burne sees in her “une créature factice, façonnée […] pour charmer. C’était un objet de luxe rare, attrayant, exquis et délicat, […] ainsi que […] les nourritures fines dont une vitre vous sépare, préparées et montrées pour exciter la faim” (558). Like Vicky Kirby, I see the division between nature and artifice as “sexually […] inflected,
with nature (woman, the body) construed as the mute and passive matter that waits to be interpreted, regulated, and given social shape and significance by culture (man, mind)” (29). Yet, while beauty is, indeed, seen as a means to seduce men, it is also re-claimed for the women’s own satisfaction. In _Notre Cœur_, Mme de Burne, a narcissistic woman, as we shall see later on, demands “l’hommage d’amour qu’elle se rendait à elle-même […] de tous” (587). In _Au Bonheur des Dames_, Denise is ridiculed by her colleagues at the department store because of her coarse, curly hair: she does not know how to subdue and adapt it to the fashion of the day, and is dubbed “la mal-peignée” (216) by both her male and female colleagues. She does not feel she needs to seduce men, however, and therefore does not change her hair to that effect, but so as to appear properly attired for work.

The idea of nature as subdued and corrupted is not only present in the descriptions of female characters, but also in Zola’s use of the theme of the garden in _Une Page d’Amour_ and _La Curée_, in which he draws “direct parallels between plant life and human sexuality” (Frey 33). In the first novel, a stark opposition is created between the Japanese pavilion in the heroine’s house, and the Deberles’ (her lover’s family) garden. The garden, which at one point becomes a wild forest through Zola’s description, is associated with nature, and, in a Rousseauvian manner, all that is innately good and unspoiled. It is here that the sweet hours of the quiet and chaste _entente_ between Hélène and her lover Henri take place, before their relationship takes a sexual turn, and that the marriage of Henri’s wife’s sister, Pauline, is decided. Moreover, this garden becomes an Eden in which the houseworkers Rosalie and Zéphyrin spend time together during the summer. The presence, within this garden, of this ideal couple, whom Zola represents as very decently, yet not asexually, in love,

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79 “The homage of love that she rendered to herself […] from everyone else”.
80 “The girl with the bad hair”, or “the badly combed one”.
reinforces the garden’s status as a symbol of purity. It is important to note that they are not from Paris, and plan to return to their home village when they are married, “the city [being], as opposed to the garden, [an] image of the fall from grace” (Gilman 120). On the other hand, the pavillon japonais, with its rigid structure and taming of the natural, is in fact associated with what is against nature and perverted – it is where the fateful rendez-vous during which they will consummate their relationship is decided between Hélène and Henri. The image of the pavilion is intensified in La Curée, where it is replaced by a sweltering greenhouse, a central space in the novel through the “rôle qu’elle joue dans l’éducation sensuelle de Renée” (Baguley, La Curée de Zola, ou “la Vie à Outrance” 72). It is there that Renée’s desire takes shape and fully reveals itself to her, where the plants and trees are coerced into an unnatural growth. Maxime tells Renée he thinks she has probably “mordu à toutes les pommes” (16), and it is also in the greenhouse, observing Maxime and Louise, that Renée formulates her desire, and bites the poisoned leaf of the exotic Tanghin plant (66).

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Fig. 7. Frederick Sandys. Love's Shadow. 1867. Oil on panel.

Frederick Sandy’s Love’s Shadow (1867, see fig. 8) is curiously reminiscent of this scene. This is a strikingly unusual portrait, even for a Pre-Raphaelite artist. The woman in it is biting a flower while she looks at something outside of the picture’s frame. While some of the painting’s elements are reminiscent of more traditional female portraits, such as the hair, the texture of her sleeve, the pearl bracelet, and the hair accessories, other are less so. Her long, luxuriant red hair, while typical of the

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81 “Its role in Renée’s sensual education”.
82 “Bitten all the apples”. 
Pre-Raphaelite school, takes on a wilder significance due to her pose. The way that she is holding a bouquet and destroying it also makes one think of the difference between the perceived natural grace, or fragility, of the woman, and what she is feeling. Furthermore, the painting’s title, *Love’s Shadow*, seems to suggest that it is jealousy that is causing her to bite the flowers, further reinforcing a connection with the passage in Zola’s novel.

Zola used the image of the greenhouse as a “métaphore ou symbole du Second Empire” (Baguley, *La Curée de Zola, ou “la Vie à Outrance”* 72): situating the most depraved scenes of his novel within one expressed his fear of a “backwards” progress (Baguley, *La Curée de Zola, ou “la Vie à Outrance”* 159), and emphasised the impact of milieu on Renée’s perversion. The greenhouse thus becomes a hellish Eden. The city of Paris is in fact often presented as a corrupting influence, most of Zola’s characters being changed and manipulated by the capital’s vastness and readily available luxuries. Furthermore, the image of the greenhouse in *La Curée* is mirrored by that of the church during the celebrations of the *mois de Marie* in *Une Page d’Amour*. Zola describes the greenhouse in *La Curée*, as full of “orchidées, dans leurs corbeilles que retenaient des chaînettes, exhalait leurs souffles, semblables à des encensoirs vivants” (262). While the greenhouse, with its censers, assumes the likeness of a cathedral, the church itself, in *Une Page d’Amour*, is transfigured into a stifling conservatory: “les fleurs alourdissaient de leur parfum l’air étouffé sous la voûte” (198). Furthermore, these pagan places of worship also have their idols. The Virgin, with whom Hélène identifies during a moment in her life in which she believes she will be able to maintain a pure, chaste love for Henri, reigns in the church. In the greenhouse, the statue of a Sphinx, symbolising Renée’s depravity, surveys its

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83 “Metaphor or symbol of the Second Empire”.
84 “Orchids in their baskets suspended by little chains, exhaled their breath, like living censers”.
85 “The flowers made the stifled air under the arches heavy with their perfume”.
domain. The connections between the Virgin and the Sphinx, and Hélène and Renée are part of Zola's carefully constructed discourse on the contrasting appearance of female characters that the men perceive, and what they truly are. Hélène only identifies with the Virgin and attends church rigorously during the celebrations because she is sexually frustrated and the magnificence and pomp of the church placate her desire. Renée reveals her jealousy and sexuality carefully hidden and under the protection of the greenhouse's sphinx.

Existing work on Zola has emphasised his view of sexuality as destructive. Passion, and, more specifically, the idea of giving in to it, is frequently associated with fire in his fiction. The author “tends to conceive of fire first and foremost as a destructive element” (Hemmings, “Fire in Zola’s Fiction”). Hélène finds herself surrounded and possessed by flames when she decides to let go of her pride and accept her love for Henri: “la passion victorieuse la dévorait, tandis que, devant elle, un soleil couchant incendiait la ville […] et elle croyait sentir toutes les flammes brûler son coeur” (Une Page d’Amour 175, my 69). Thérèse, also, exudes the same flame-like ardour: “on eût dit que des flammes s’échappaient de sa chair” (Thérèse Raquin 54), whilst Renée’s relationship with Maxime is a “jouissance enflammée” (La Curée 236). The almost violent imagery which is used in these novels to express sexual passion situates it within a hellish atmosphere: “chez Zola l’entrée dans la sexualité ne saurait être qu’une descente aux enfers” (Bertrand-Jennings 16). Zola’s representation of illicit, and, more specifically, adulterous sexuality as essentially evil is mirrored by the female characters’ awareness of the implications of

86 “A conquering passion devoured her, whilst, in front of her, the setting sun burnt down the city […] and she thought she could feel all those flames burning her own heart”.
87 “Flames seemed to emanate from her flesh”.
88 “Burning pleasure” – NB: the word “jouissance”, which I have chosen to translate as “pleasure”, can also mean “orgasm”, heightening the sexually suggestive tone of the phrase.
89 “For Zola, the beginning of sexuality cannot be separated from a descent into Hell”.
their actions. Renée revels in “un amour qu’elle regardait comme un crime” (La Curée 255). Many critics have highlighted Zola’s insistence on “la vulnérabilité légendaire des femmes à cette forme [...] de la folie qu’est l’amour dans l'optique naturaliste” (Bertrand-Jennings 51). This madness is depicted not as an inability, but as a lack of will to resist the forces which draw not only Thérèse, but also Renée and Hélène to the men they desire. Closer attention to that lack of will to resist demonstrates that a more positive view of these torrid, sometimes criminal, affairs exists. In Cross’s story, the depiction of Theodora relies heavily on the symbolic associations of the colour red and fire, for example, highlighting Cecil’s perception of her as a fiery, sensual woman, the firelight playing on her body at their every meeting. At the end of the story, the narrator moves from Theodora’s “burning kiss” to the “snowy night” (37), using once again that very same imagery and opposing it to the colour white, and the cold of the snow, an opposition which could, in light of the narrator’s thoughts after each sensually-charged meeting with Theodora, signify the contrast between passion and desire and rationality and thought. While passion sets Zola’s women on fire, the fiery imagery in Cross is in the man’s mind, as he attributes its destructive power to the body of Theodora. This division is exemplary of the influence of the male gaze/narrator/author on the perception of passion, desire, sexuality, and its effect on the female character or body. As we shall see, despite the significance of the masculine point of view in both the British and the French works, these fictions

90 “A love she regarded as a crime”.
91 “Knew she was doing wrong”.
92 “Cherished her wrongdoing”.
93 “Women’s legendary vulnerability to love, which naturalism sees as a form of madness”.
construct complex female characters, and sexuality is a key element to their characterisation.

**Reflection versus Sensation**

_Thérèse Raquin_ is significant due to its approach to the importance of a woman’s education and reason on her sexual development. Because of the animalistic nature of Thérèse’s desire, something which will be further analysed later on in this chapter, it is when her lover, Laurent, unveils his grotesque representation of her husband, Camille, in his painting, that Thérèse awakens to the difference between the two men. This is a very effective way for the author to show Thérèse’s “uneducated”, unsophisticated, and unmediated way of perceiving her husband. It is also significant to note that Thérèse is never shown reading in the first part of the novel, and that it is precisely this activity which will, together with the guilt she feels about Camille’s murder, estrange her further from Laurent. The theme of *lecture* is also present in this novel, and it interestingly enables a different perspective to be conveyed, not only to the reader, but also to Thérèse herself. Thérèse is in fact educated in a very different way through her reading, her animalistic nature being tamed by the novels she reads for the first time:

La lecture lui ouvrit des horizons romanesques qu'elle ignorait encore; elle n'avait aimé qu'avec son sang et ses nerfs, elle se mit à aimer avec sa tête. [...] Les romans, en lui parlant de chasteté et d'honneur, mirent comme un obstacle entre ses instincts et sa volonté (Thérèse
Here, Zola presents the dichotomy of feeling and thought in a way which much resembles the depictions found in New Woman fiction. Thérèse’s impulses are tamed by the higher, civilising qualities of chastity and honour she discovers in the novels. Zola opposes “son sang et ses nerfs” to “sa tête”, and “ses instincts” to “sa volonté”, implying that even a character like Thérèse can aspire to be more than a creature of instinct. When considering the importance of education in the development of the erotic in *La Curée*, the strange relationship between Renée and Maxime becomes extremely significant. Renée being his stepmother, he receives his education through her:

> L’étrange éducation que la jeune femme donnait à l’enfant; les familiarités qui firent d’eux des camarades; plus tard, l’audace rieuse de leurs confidences; toute cette promiscuité périlleuse finit par les attacher d’un singulier lien, où les joies de l’amitié devenaient presque des satisfactions charnelles (*La Curée* 251)

This passage illustrates Zola’s awareness that feeling and thought are opposed, but that, in this case, they can also complement each other. It is through a careful cultivation of the atmosphere in which her stepson reaches a certain age, and an initiation into her own interests, that a desire between them arises. In this case, Zola suggests that thought can also create, and direct, sensation.

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94 “Reading revealed to her novelistic horizons which she still ignored; she had only loved with her blood and her nerves, and she began loving with her mind. […] The novels, in telling her about chastity and honour, had created an obstacle between her instincts and her will”.

95 “The strange education the young woman gave to the child; the familiarities which made friends of them; and, later, the cheerful audacity of their confidences; all that perilous promiscuity had the effect of creating a singular bond between them, in which the joys of friendship almost became carnal satisfactions.”
De Beauvoir insists on the difficulty of explaining the erotic to the young woman, opposing the ease of education on reproduction, and the difficulty of preparing the young woman for erotic feeling:

Il faut dire que même un enseignement cohérent ne résoudrait pas le problème; malgré toute la bonne volonté des parents et des maîtres, on ne saurait mettre en mots et en conceptes l’expérience érotique; on ne la comprend qu’en la vivant […]. [O]n peut bien théoriquement éclaircir le mystère de la génération: celui de la volupté et de l’amour sexuel demeure entier. (Beauvoir II, 59)\(^6\)

The clarifying and understanding of the mystery that is sexuality is the result of a combination of sense, feeling, and reflection. The different ways in which these three elements come together and influence each other is at the very heart of the concerns surrounding female sexuality in New Woman, as well as naturalist and realist French fiction of the period.

As Rachel Mesch argues, “[i]n many naturalist novels [...] female sexuality was a primary theme, and was represented as a source of danger or the locus of social degeneration” (6). In the novels which I consider in this chapter, however, the representation of female eroticism becomes a much more complex discourse. As we shall see, the intricacy of the notions of education, and, perhaps more importantly, of milieu, in the construction of female desire denote the complexity of Renée’s character, who, from the moment she is raped, lets herself fall into a world of luxury, sex, and, finally, incest. Similarly, Hélène’s cyclic progression from a proud and honest, chaste wife and mother of the Provence, to a passionate, self-centred and

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\(^6\) “In truth, even a coherent education would not resolve the problem; despite all the good will on the part of parents and teachers, it would not be possible to translate into words and concepts the erotic experience; it can only be understood by being experienced […]. The mystery of procreation can, in theory, be clarified, but the mystery of sensuality, of voluptuousness, of sexual love, remains complete”. 

almost obsessed Parisian lover, to then a return to the former, seems strongly to denote a desire, on Zola’s part, to draw attention to the perils of idleness and the influences of an inappropriate milieu, or entourage. Thérèse, on the other hand, represents what is perhaps a more conventionally naturalist conception of a woman’s problematic nature and subsequently, sexual life, due to Zola’s explanation of her passionate nature as inherited from her mother. The character of Denise, who might have been corrupted by her fellow workers, or decided to give in to Mouret before his proposal, represents a kind of hope in the midst of the other three female characters which have been considered. One can thus arrive at a conclusion which dictates the necessity of some predisposition to “sinning” – the use of this word seems justified by some of the moralistic connotations found in the work of Zola. Moreover, Denise becomes an almost unreal creature in Zola’s fictional world of the Rougon-Macquart, to the extent of seeming ideal in her almost obstinate virginity: “la chasteté féminine est également valorisée […] et il est significatif que les figures de femmes idéales […] sont celles dont est minimisée, voire ôtée, la réalité sexuelle” (Bertrand-Jennings 103). In the case of Denise, therefore, Zola presents a positive female figure that, interestingly, is very similar to the New Woman characters whose creation is informed by ideas of social purity.

One of the characteristics which draw the characters of Renée, Thérèse and Hélène together is the relevance of the novel’s structure in its analysis of the female as a sexual subject. These works choose to present the characters, and to then go back to their past, and in doing so, expose them as subjects for analysis. La Curée, for example, introduces the reader to the character of Renée and her possible desire for Maxime in the first chapter, and then returns, during two long chapters, to her

97 “Female chastity is also valued […] and it is significant that the ideal female figures […] are those whose sexuality is reduced to a minimum, or even removed”. 
childhood and the beginnings of her relationship with Maxime. After that, Chapter IV begins exactly where the first chapter had left off, thus further emphasising the importance and centrality of Renée’s desire and jealousy towards Maxime.

Une Page d’Amour uses a similar structure. After introducing the main characters, Zola returns in time to Hélène’s uneventful childhood and youth, her first encounter with her husband Charles – who, probably rather deliberately, has the same name as Madame Bovary’s husband – and their marriage. As with Thérèse, albeit in a different way, Zola makes clear that this was not a very passionate marriage, describing her as “pleine d’amitié” (Une Page d’Amour 82)\(^{98}\) for her husband, and insisting that “pendant douze ans, elle ne se souvenait pas d’une secousse” (Une Page d’Amour 82).\(^{99}\) The beginning of the novel, in fact, powerfully constructs Hélène as “irreproachably virtuous, […] a stranger to passion” (Hemmings, Émile Zola 131). The revisiting of her past, and specifically of her life with her husband, is brought on fluidly from her meditations about Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe, a seemingly minor detail, which, again, serves to draw a parallel between Hélène Grandjean and Emma Bovary, who favoured this author before she was married. The preoccupation with the possible influences of reading on a young woman is very common of the period, and it is interesting to see how Zola uses it and manages to construct carefully a very malleable character out of Hélène. Despite being a widow, as well as a mother, Hélène has never felt a passionate love for a man. The power of the novel’s use of the impact of reading on Hélène and on her “idea of love, derived from the novel” (Frey 330) is all the more effective due to the resulting contrast, perceived by the character, of the difference between her own experience with Charles and that of the heroes in the books she reads, and, later on, her adulterous

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\(^{98}\) “Full of friendship”.

\(^{99}\) “She could not remember a single thrill in those twelve years”.

affair with Henri Deberle. This passage thus acquires great significance within the novel’s structure, as it represents a turning point in Hélène’s life. Moreover, its situation, in the fifth chapter of the novel’s first part, emphasises the danger of these influences upon the character’s mind, being situated after her first encounter with the man who will later become her lover, Henri. The final part of Hélène’s education happens when she reflects, for the second time, upon her married life, and her recent experiences with Henri make her despise the coldness of her past life as Charles’ wife.

Sarah Grand’s fiction repeatedly presents the triangular dilemma of sexuality, experience and reflection within a complex discourse revolving around the opposition of feeling and thought. Her own position as a strong advocate of rational thought necessarily imposes a dominant presence of reflection over sensation. In *The Heavenly Twins*, Edith “strives to banish” (168) her thoughts in a bid to enjoy her happiness during Mosley Menteith’s courtship: “she was very happy but she did not think. She did not want to think” (168). The female characters in Grand’s novels are oppressed by their thoughts and sensations, which become a burden to their minds and bodies. The emotional turmoil created when feeling takes over thought is invariably presented as a path to unhappiness, resulting in the idea that woman cannot live both a life of reason and senses. In Dowie’s *Gallia*, this idea is taken further in its emphasis of a dichotomy of the body and the mind: Dark Essex tells the novel’s eponymous heroine that her “outward form [...] does not suit [her] mind” (128). In striving to challenge, and ultimately abolish, the traditional view prevalent in the nineteenth century of woman as a creature of instinct, the privileging of mind over sensation in Grand, and, to a much lesser extent, Dowie’s fiction denounce

100 Rational thought was closely linked to the idea of rational reproduction: it was imperative for women to “make responsible sex choices” (Richardson, “The Eugenization of Love: Sarah Grand and the Morality of Genealogy” 239), and to put thought ahead of sensation.
women’s desire to abandon themselves to sensuality, and in doing so, partly re-enact and re-establish the image of the pure, sexless woman. This is not a new idea, given, as I have previously mentioned, Grand’s position as an advocate of the rational thought movement. Other New Woman authors did choose to represent highly sexual female characters – George Egerton’s “A Cross Line” (1893) is the most famous example. I believe, however, that comparing Grand’s more conservative approach with the French authors brings forth more interesting ideas about choice and duty, and the scope of my own work lies in this. It must be noted that the heterogeneity of the New Woman’s position “against the dominant sexual ideology of the Victorian period” (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* 28) finds expression in the works this chapter considers: Theodora’s veneration of nature, Gallia’s active declaration of her love for Dark Essex, and Evadne or Ideala’s rejection of their husbands on the grounds of their disapproval of their conduct are all valid, albeit contradictory, expressions of the New Woman’s claim to a new status as a sexual subject.

The most significant and empowering aspect of Grand’s depiction of the dichotomy of feeling and thought is the way in which this clash motivates a choice, or, at any rate, a privileging of one over the other, within her female characters. It is most particularly in *The Heavenly Twins* and *Ideala* that Grand puts forth this need for choice in the strongest manner. Allowing her heroines to momentarily live the life of the senses, Grand’s position is nevertheless unflinching in its moralistic didacticism. Thus, Edith loses her mind after contracting syphilis from her husband. In a less dramatic but similarly telling manner, Ideala admits her husband’s negative influence on her thoughts when she tells her friends:
I cannot tell you what it was to feel myself going down, and not to be able to help it [...]; to feel the gradual change in my mind as it grew to harbour thoughts which were reflections of his [...] low thoughts, and to be filled with ideas [...] which had caused me infinite disgust [...] but remained with me [...] until I almost acquired a morbid liking for them.

(2487)

In the novel, she has a platonic affair with a man, Lorrimer, which almost ends with her leaving her husband for him. While Grand does not remove responsibility from Ideala, there is a sense that her lack of judgement has something to do with Lorrimer’s own character, in whom “the highest and most spiritual aspirations warred [...] with the most carnal impulses, [as] he spent his days in fighting to attain to the one and subdue the other” (1269). Moreover, her fiction purports the view that a woman cannot, and indeed, must not, allow for sensation to predominate over reflection. Evadne’s desire for her husband is strongly contrasted by her opinion of him: she “refuses to consummate her marriage [due to his] dubious sexual past [and] suffers from sexual frustration” (Ledger, Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle 32). It is precisely this self-sacrificing choice which is at the core of Grand’s fictional representation of the opposition of feeling and thought. Similarly, Ideala’s decision not to “escape” with Lorrimer is applauded and welcomed as the “right thing to do” by her entourage. Furthermore, Ann Heilmann views Ideala’s choice in a slightly different way, emphasising that it is her friend, Lord Dawne, who “inscribes sexual ‘purity’ on the woman he loves” (New Woman Strategies 55). Unfortunately all of this has the effect of removing Ideala’s agency: not only is she morally corrupted by a man, but she is also “saved” by one. Additionally, and on a more positive note, this also illuminates the manner in which Grand’s view on sexual morality is constructed.
around the fallacy of the double moral standard, and a fascinating intertwining of binaries opposing desire and moral duty. Thus, Ideala simultaneously feels desire for Lorrimer, but is married, wishes to satisfy her desire and to be good, feels her false marriage renders her free, yet chooses to stay, and so on. Similarly, Lord Dawne wishes her to be happy, yet feels a selfish attachment to her, and advises her in order for her to maintain a dignified position, but also to keep her close to himself. This is echoed by de Beauvoir, for whom “l’homme […] assène pompeusement [à la femme] son code de vertu et d’honneur; mais en douce il l’invite à y désobéir: il escompte même cette désobéissance; sans elle, toute cette belle façade s’effondrerait” (II, 497)\textsuperscript{101}. Furthermore, the question of applying morality to sexuality becomes increasingly complex, as woman finds that

\begin{quote}
l’homme peut en quantité de cas sans salir sa haute figure perpétrer en complicité avec la femme des actes qui pour elle sont flétrissants. Elle entend mal ces subtilités; ce qu’elle comprend, c’est que l’homme n’agit pas conformément aux principes qu’il affiche et qu’il lui demande d’y désobéir; il ne veut pas ce qu’il dit vouloir; aussi ne lui donne-t-elle pas ce qu’elle feint de lui donner. Elle sera une chaste et fidèle épouse, et elle cédera en cachette à ses désirs. (II, 498)\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

Despite agreeing with the above, I cannot help but feel that satisfying these urges \textit{en cachette} does not solve the problem, but perpetuates it, in a never-ending chain of fake moralities and secret pleasures. It is therefore necessary for “Grand’s […]

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{101} “Man pompously assaults the woman with his code of virtue and honour; yet surreptitiously incites her to disobey it: and he anticipates this violation, as, without it, the beautiful, virtuous façade would crumble down”.
\textsuperscript{102} “In numerous cases, men will be able to commit acts with impunity, which are considered corrupting for women. She does not understand these subtleties; what she does understand, is that man does not act in accordance with the principles he displays and entices her to disobey them; he does not want what he claims to want; thus, she does not give him what she pretends to. She will be a chaste, faithful wife, and will secretly give in to her desires”.
\end{flushright}
heroines [to] learn to control their erotic desire [and move] from sensuality to sensibility” (Heilmann 36). While Grand does not deny her female characters sensual, and sexual, potential, her condemnation is unequivocal when that sensuality is caused by a morally inferior man. Like Grand, “social purists and eugenists argued that women were biologically designed to be morally superior” (Richardson, “The Eugenization of Love” 240), necessitating “the ideological apparatus of chastity, marriage and motherhood” to uphold “the doctrine of woman’s natural moral superiority” (Stubbs 126). Grand’s heroines’ choice thus upholds the writer’s belief in their duty to elevate themselves to the superior position to which they, as women, belong.

In Zola’s vision, moral issues are closely tied with the political situation of France, rather than the sexual double standard. Brian Nelson notes that “[i]n *La Curée*, the new city under construction at the hands of Haussmann’s workmen becomes a vast symbol of the corruption, as well as the dynamism, of Second Empire society” (B. Nelson 60). One of the most striking preoccupations expressed is that of what Baguley calls “la dépravation morale causée, selon Zola, par la richesse exhorbitante des spéculateurs et par le relâchement des mœurs qui s’ensuit” (*La Curée de Zola, ou “la Vie à Outrance”* 157). The progressive downfall of *La Curée*’s Renée, caused firstly by her rape, and, secondly by her “arranged” marriage to Aristide Saccard, which was to save her from her shame, instead sees her “nature bourgeoise” and “honnêteté absolue” (161) replaced by a newly acquired taste for the unattainable and the forbidden, in her “fantaisies prodigieuses” and “désirs inavouables” (161). The very luxury of the *hôtel* in which she, her

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103 “The moral depravity caused by the outrageous wealth of the speculators and the ensuing laxity of morals”.
104 “Bourgeois nature”, “absolute honesty”.
105 “Prodigious fantasies”, “undisclosable desires”.
husband and Maxime live seems to influence and change her. Zola tells us how Renée “s’y sentait plus inquiète, plus rêveuse; ses jupes de soie glissaient avec des sifflements de couleuvre sur les épais tapis” (161, my italics). Furthermore, this is an image which Zola uses again with the character of Mme. Desforges, Octave Mouret’s rich lover in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, who, having set a trap to humiliate Denise in front of him, walks towards her and “sa robe de soie noire, contre la porte, eut un frôlement de couleuvre, filant dans la broussaille” (365). This repetition seems to emphasise the evil nature of these two rich women, and therefore of the corrupting properties of money. This is also reflected in *La Curée*. As Thompson argues, this novel is set amongst the newly rich capitalists whose wealth comes from the financial speculations encouraged by Haussmann’s remodeling of Paris. The protagonists […] have unlimited amounts of time and money, which they spend on increasingly hedonistic activities. For Zola, non-procreative sexuality is the most frivolous of pleasures, and the instances of male and female homosexuality in the novel function as allegories of the moral degeneration of Second Empire society.

(Thompson 56)

In *Une Page d’Amour*, Hélène’s guilt about having an affair is appeased by the realisation that this is common practice in her entourage: “on avait bien tort de rêver des drames noirs, tout se dénouait avec une bonhomie charmante. Elle […] goûtais ainsi un lâche bonheur à se dire que rien n’était défendu” (410, my italics).

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106 “Felt more anxious, dreamier; her silk skirts would slide over the thick carpets, hissing like snakes”.
107 “Her black silk dress rustled against the door, like a snake in the bushes”.
108 “It was such a mistake to worry about terrible tragedies, everything was unfolding in the most pleasing manner. She […] would thus taste a cowardly happiness, telling herself nothing was forbidden”.
Where Grand ultimately does not allow, or condone, those vicarious, secretive thrills for her heroines, and Zola highlights the influence of the Second Empire, Maupassant unapologetically uncovers the hypocrisy inherent to such views, and does so in different ways, which illuminate the author’s investment in the depiction of women. In “Au Bord du Lit” (1883), he depicts a frank conversation between man and wife, during which she not only asserts that his admission of adultery implies his “autorisation de vous imiter” (157), but bluntly demands to “faire la balance entre nous” (157). In the novel *Notre Coeur*, written seven years after this story, he pushes this idea even further in his delineation of a male character, Mariolle. The novel is fascinating in its deep analysis of the vicissitudes of a couple’s sentimental and sexual journey. Much of the narrative tension occurs as a result of Mariolle’s dissatisfaction with his lover’s relatively lesser interest in sex. Although the novel’s ending is left fairly open, the premise of it is that Mariolle will finally find solace by contemporaneously having two relationships, one of which will be more sexual. Mariolle’s jealousy throughout the novel, and Maupassant’s final resolution illustrate men’s hypocrisy when it comes to a woman’s virtue. In de Beauvoir’s mind, it is “the rule of the game”; man needs there to be those two sides of the coin, although he will never openly admit it (II, 499).

Throughout his work, Maupassant’s writing challenges the sexual double standard, and this is an especially salient feature of his short fiction – bawdy, yet never coarse, light-hearted, yet allowing for some extremely lucid reflections on sexuality, and paying particular attention to women. As Georges Belle points out in his preface to *Contes Grivois*, a recent edited collection of short stories by

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109 “Permission to imitate you”, “set the record straight between us”– NB: If his usage of the word “autorisation” may be interpreted as denoting a hierarchical relation between the two, I feel it is more profitable to see it as denoting her wish for a relationship based on truly equal grounds: as he has had an affair, she feels, and is, perfectly entitled to, as well.
Maupassant centred on the theme of sex, “filles perdues et femmes sauvées peuplent sans souci de discrimination [ses contes]. Sans compter que les plus perverses et les moins honorables ne sont pas celles que l’intolérance et l’hypocrisie du temps désignaient d’un doigt accusateur” (Belle ix). Notre Coeur situates its heroine between the morally didactic novels of Sarah Grand and the more erotically evoking work of Émile Zola. As such, I think it is now appropriate to discuss the way in which reason and feeling are presented through its main character, Mme de Burne. Contrary to Grand’s depiction of reason as moral duty, Maupassant examines the possibility of reason as intrinsic to the female character. Instead of showing a budding desire which is checked, or finds itself in opposition to a previous, more “reasonable” position, the character of Mme de Burne allows for a reversal of these terms. She is a widow when she begins her affair with Mariolle, who is one of her numerous admirers. One of the novel’s main themes is Mariolle’s frustration with her seemingly passionless nature, “cette impuissance d’aimer dont elle était frappée” (2852). Mme de Burne loves Mariolle “à [sa] façon” (2872), she is not frigid, or uninterested in sex, as some of their passionate encounters prove, but simply prefers their companionship to be based on an intellectual entente, and not exclusively on sexual chemistry. The initial desire felt at the beginning of their relationship is not, contrary to what is shown in some of Grand’s novels, a result of the negative influence of the man, but a natural impulse elicited by nature. Mariolle’s despair, however, is not a misogynistic hatred of the woman who refuses to give herself as the man would want her, but can be seen as a reflection on the plurality of women’s attitudes to sex. Mme de Burne tells herself that “[e]lle résistait trop, elle

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110 Fallen and saved women indiscriminately populate [his short stories]. Not to mention that the most perverse, less honourable women are not those which the intolerance and hypocrisy of the time accused.

111 “That impossibility to love which had struck her”.

112 “In her own way”.
raisonnait trop, elle combattait trop le charme des gens. Ne serait-il pas doux […] pour payer toute sa passion, de lui offrir, de temps en temps, ses lèvres?” (942).  

After she loses interest in sex, she tries to overcome this aversion for the sake of the man she loves, yet, “quand elle songeait à cela, à cette folie tendre où pouvait nous jeter l’existence voisine d’un autre être, […], elle s’en jugeait incapable” (892).  

Maupassant’s novel, by providing such deep insight into both the man and the woman, not only depicts the complexity of the thought/feeling dilemma within the female character, but also the male perception of that duality.

Both Zola’s and Maupassant’s treatment of (female) sexuality have erroneously been regarded as simplistic or detrimental to the image of women. Zola has been accused of showing “little consideration to the formidable extension of the erotic beyond the narrowly biological frontiers” (Hemmings, Émile Zola, 148), for example, and Elizabeth Nolan has qualified Maupassant’s fiction as denoting an “androcentric position” and engaging in a “masculinist discourse” (123). As will become apparent throughout my thesis, however, these authors’ treatment of sensation and reflection is striking in its awareness of the conflict it poses to the female sexual subject, and denotes a strong attentiveness to the female sexual experience. In La Curée, Renée presents a departure as, for her, a sexual affair is presented as a way of satisfying the mind as well as the body: “l’amour éclatait dans sa tête comme un pétard, dont les étincelles n’allaient pas jusqu’au coeur” (163).  

Her sexual urges are attributed to “son insatiable besoin de savoir et de sentir” (162, my italics) and her sexual desire is said to “break down” her brain (162).

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113 “She resisted too much, reasoned too much, she fought people’s charm. Wouldn’t it be sweet […] to offer him, every so often, her lips, as a way to pay back his own passion?”
114 “When she thought of it, of that tender madness which another being’s closeness could create, […] she felt she was incapable of it”.
115 “Love would explode in her head, like a firecracker whose sparks did not reach her heart”.
116 “Her insatiable desire to know and feel”.
In *Une Page d'Amour*, Hélène Grandjean’s presentation of herself as a cold, almost unfeeling woman, which repeatedly makes use of words such as “orgueil” and “honnêteté” (84)\(^\text{117}\), is diametrically opposed to the woman she becomes with Henri, making her, out of the four heroines of the four novels, the prime example of the “disruptive force of the passion of love” (Hemmings, *Émile Zola* 127). Chantal Bertrand-Jennings’s affirmation that these heroines “sont la vie, elles ne la pensent pas” (49)\(^\text{118}\) is, however, an unnecessary oversimplification. Indeed, these characters’ appeal and complexity resides precisely in Zola’s depiction of the awareness of an inability to reason, which is nevertheless very consciously embraced in favour of an abandonment to sensuality and rêverie. Hélène exemplifies this in a wonderful passage in which she fully shuns thought as an obstacle to her happiness: “une raillerie terrible lui venait contre sa raison. Sa raison! En vérité, elle lui faisait pitié, cette raison qui, dans une vie déjà longue, ne lui avait pas apporté une somme de joie comparable à la joie qu’elle goûtait depuis une heure” (174)\(^\text{119}\).

The rationalisation of desire is not entirely absent from *Thérèse Raquin*, despite Zola’s intention to examine and depict two characters exempt from reflection, as he stated in the preface to the novel’s second edition: “J’ai voulu étudier des tempéraments et non des caractères. […] J’ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entraînés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chair” (12)\(^\text{120}\). Whilst it cannot be denied that both Thérèse and Laurent are dominated by their desire for each other, what is interesting about these two characters is the way in which Zola

\(^{117}\) “Pride”, “honesty”.

\(^{118}\) “Are life, they do not reflect on it”.

\(^{119}\) “She would sneer at her reason. Her reason! In truth, she felt sorry for that reason, which, during an already long life, had never brought anything comparable to the joy she had felt in the past hour”.

\(^{120}\) “My aim was to examine temperament, not character. […] I chose two protagonists who were entirely dominated by their nerves and their blood, devoid of free will, each and every action in their lives driven by the inevitability of their flesh”.
enables them to reflect upon their inability to reason. In one of the most fascinating passages in *Thérèse Raquin*, the one in which she explains her feelings to Laurent during one of their first encounters, Thérèse uses her desire for him, and the freedom that is bestowed upon her by their sexual encounters, to explain herself to him. She tells him that “lorsque tu étais là, mes nerfs se tendaient à se rompre, *ma tête se vidait*, je voyais rouge” (*Thérèse Raquin* 58, my italics). At this point in the novel, the author has already informed the reader of Thérèse’s uneasiness and attraction towards Laurent during their first meeting, yet this has happened in passages with zéro focalisation, told by an omniscient narrator: “La nature sanguine de ce garçon, sa voix pleine, ses rires gras, les senteurs âcres et puissantes qui s’échappaient de sa personne, troublaient la jeune femme et la jetaient dans une sorte d’angoisse nerveuse” (48). Here, Zola chooses to use direct speech in order to convey more directly those very same impressions, as she tells Laurent that “ta vue m’irritait, me faisait souffrir” (58).

These are not Zola’s enriched, refined, interpretations of the feelings she cannot put into words, Thérèse is given the ability to articulate these herself. Zola describes their passion as “cette fièvre trouble qui emplissait leur cerveau d’une sorte de vapeur trouble et âcre” (76, my italics), yet the couple’s constant analysis of the lustful, carnal nature of their relationship reveals that desire and reason are, in truth, thoroughly intertwined.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (n.p.). He maintains that

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121 “When you were there, my nerve would become so tense it seemed they could snap, *my head would become empty*, I would see red”.
122 “The sanguine nature of that boy, his rich voice, loud laughter, the acrid, powerful smell emanating from his body troubled the young woman, made her feel anguished and nervous”.
123 “Seeing you irritated me, made me suffer”.
124 “That confusing fever which filled their brain with a blurred, acrid mist”.
Impressions may be divided into two kinds, those of sensation and those of reflection. The first kind arises in the soul originally, from unknown causes. The second is derived in a great measure from our ideas, and that in the following order. An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflection, because derived from it. These again are copied by the memory and imagination, and become ideas; which perhaps in their turn give rise to other impressions and ideas. So that the impressions of reflection are only antecedent to their correspondent ideas; but posterior to those of sensation, and derived from them. (n.p.)

While Thérèse and Laurent’s crime and subsequent guilt signals a return to reason and a disdain for sensuality, mirroring Hume’s definition of ideas as resulting from impressions, again, the importance of this novel, too, resides in its capacity to combine its study of the choice to ignore thought in favour of sensation. The consequences of their crime make it all too easy to think of Zola’s most erotically daring novel as his most morally conservative evaluation of sexuality. Nevertheless, I believe that the richness and complexity of their desire for one another, and, more importantly, the introspection it inspires, are the qualities that redeem Thérèse and Laurent in the eyes of the reader.
A woman’s decision to privilege sensation does not signify a surrender of her subjectivity. In fact, as de Beauvoir argues, “la volupté est chez [la femme] un total abandon; si des mots ou des gestes contestent la magie des caresses, l’envoûtement se dissipe. […] Elle veut se perdre au coeur d’une nuit charnelle” (II, 181). De Beauvoir is here alluding to the woman’s need to feel as one with her partner during the sexual act. The intensity of these characters’ desire means that renouncing reason is the only way to immerse themselves completely in the pleasure of it and their sensations. Indeed, their choice of sensation over reflection does not constitute a loss, but a complete enjoyment of the sensual, or sexual, experience. As such, both Hélène and Mme de Burne are powerful expressions of Zola and Maupassant’s understanding of the conflict inherent to female sexual enjoyment: giving in to lust signifies admitting one’s animality, and (temporarily?) renouncing reason. On the other hand, Grand’s inability to portray these issues with the same clarity as the French male writers, coupled with her insistence on morality and rationality, places the emphasis on woman’s ability to be more than an animal, moving the focus away from sexual abandonment. In Thérèse Raquin, the sensations which Laurent enables Thérèse to feel seem to bring forth a very explicit reflection on her past and the life she has been forced to lead. The animalistic side of femininity found in the novels which this chapter considers is thus more complex and multifaceted than it may seem at first. Thérèse’s abandonment to her physical and sensual needs finally allows her to externalise her true nature, exposing not only her

Footnotes:

125 “For the woman, sensuality is […] complete abandonment; if words or gestures break the magic of caresses, the spell is broken. […] She wishes to lose herself at the heart of a carnal night”.

126 I have mentioned the need to acknowledge that these fictions are written by male and female authors whose own experiences in life would have had a bearing on the way they portrayed such issues. As a man, Zola had not only the experience, but the freedom to disregard the scandal caused by his audacious novels. Sarah Grand, on the other hand, was a married woman, and as such, had to maintain a certain decorum. Stephanie Forward claims she was “disgusted by her husband’s sexual advances, and by coarse aspects of his behaviour generally: there was a sense of being confined and invaded” (67): this is in fact often cited as one of the reasons for Grand’s less sexually overt fiction. Maupassant was a notorious womaniser, never got married, and died of syphilis.
physical nakedness, but also enabling her to unveil and free herself from her oppressive way of life: “cette femme […] se redressait enfin, mettait à nu son être entier, expliquant sa vie” (55). This is in fact the only instance in which she explains her thoughts and feelings herself, unmediated by the narrator’s voice.

_Gallia’s_ heroine exemplifies the “New Woman principles of plain speaking and […] self-analysis” (G. Cunningham 99). After her first sensual, yet essentially eventless, encounter with Dark Essex, Gallia places a very high demand on herself to be rational, asking herself what it would be “reasonable for her to feel” (91, my italics), sensation immediately giving rise to a reflection on it, which is characteristic of the period (Gagnier, _Individualism, Decadence and Globalization_ 70). This is an extremely interesting sentence, as it highlights the complexity of applying rationality to feeling better than any other in the works which are considered here, reason appearing as a suffocating feeling, in an almost paradoxical correlation. Moreover, Gallia is presented as having the ability to control and rationalise her feelings, seeking further analysis of herself, spending time with the man she loves to “see how he makes her feel” (127).

It is interesting to consider Victoria Cross’s story in light of the analysis on the reflection on sensation found in _The Heavenly Twins_ and _Gallia_. This story marks a departure from the two works analysed previously, firstly because of its differing perspective, due to its male first-person narration. Very much like the characters of Edith, Evadne, Angelica and Gallia, Cecil presents a very marked consciousness of the need to reflect on one’s feelings and sensations, realising the thunderous effect of Theodora’s presence on his ability to think – “that look seemed to push away, walk over, ignore my reason, and appeal directly to the eager physical nerves and

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127 “This woman […] was finally awaking, showing herself completely, explaining her life”.
muscles” (19), much like Evadne, whose “senses” are “troubled” by the physical
closeness of her husband (Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* 344). In Victoria Cross’s
story, the dichotomy between feeling and thought is not only emphasised, but
dependent on the absence of the desired woman: “removed from the excitement of
Theodora’s actual presence, my thoughts lapped quietly over the whole interview”
(19). However, the “delirium of passion” and “madness” (36) which stem from Cecil’s
desire for Theodora are constantly constrained by the presence of an
interdependence of thought and feeling, this idea being at the centre of the story’s
shift away from more conventional binary delineations of these two elements.
Contrary to the passages in which rationality and sensuality are presented as mutual
exclusives, here we can, at times, find a more nuanced intertwining of the two,
Cecil’s realisation of the pleasure which a woman such as Theodora would be able
to give him inducing a physical yearning for her, his consenting mind allowing for its
temporary submission to the senses. Furthermore, Cecil even associates the brain,
the very locus of thought, with feeling, a look from Theodora affecting “those very
inner cells of the brain where are the springs themselves of passion” (29).

In Grand’s fiction, the dilemma of feeling versus sensation is highlighted by the
idea that love defies reason. The character of Edith in *The Heavenly Twins* is
particularly significant when considering this. Not only is there an ironic reference to
the way in which she will contract syphilis when she is described as having lost “her
wits” about Mosley (191), but her persona enables Grand to make a strong
assertion about the resemblance between the sentiments of love and faith through
her. It might perhaps be of use to consider the passage in which Edith’s faith is
described in such great detail as being analogous to some sort of sensual state. De
Beauvoir describes the veneration that might result from a woman’s love for a man in
a way which closely resembles Edith’s own feelings: “elle exaltera souverainement l’aimé, […] elle s’anéantira devant lui. L’amour devient pour elle une religion” (II, 540). Edith’s enraptured demonstrations of faith take place shortly after her yet unnamed realisation of her love for Mosley. Her religious fervour, during which she feels “her heart […] expand anew” (Grand 169, my italics) draws an explicit parallelism between her religious fervour and her previous encounter with Mosley. Furthermore, she has intuitively created her own way of exercising religion, “not knowing that the Roman Catholics practise it as a duty always” (169), in a similar way to sexual initiation. At the end of her prayers, “flooded” by “a deep and sensuous glow of delight”, sinking “into a stupor of ecstatic contemplation” (169, my italics), Edith’s state resembles more that of a woman during and after orgasm than of one in her own situation. As de Beauvoir notes, “quand la sexualité féminine se développe, elle se trouve pénétrée du sentiment religieux que la femme a voué à l’homme dès l’enfance” (II, 43). This is further highlighted by the description of “Edith’s bedroom, architecturally Gothic like a church”, which “contains […] religious icons that convey a sacrificial message” (Murphy 145).

In Gallia and The Heavenly Twins, the worship of her husband that is expected of a wife is at times equated with religious worship. A husband is thus a “lord-god” (Dowie 42), and a “Master” (Grand 169), the woman becoming a child in need of “strong support” and “a sure refuge” (Grand 169) in Edith’s prayers, in which she has the courage to address God in the way in which she desires to address Mosley. De Beauvoir writes that “l’amour féminin est l’une des formes de l’expérience dans laquelle une conscience se fait objet pour un être qui la transcende; et ce sont aussi

128 “She engages in an intense exaltation of her loved one, […] she annihilates herself in front of him. Love, for her, becomes a religion”.
129 “When female sexuality develops, it is penetrated by the religious sentiment that woman has devoted to man since her childhood”.
faith is trust, reliance, belief, and does not necessitate proof. An analogy between desire / love, and faith constructs these feelings as contrary to logic and reason. The discourse on reason and sensation takes many forms, and one of these is, as I shall now demonstrate, the representation of female characters who oppose these two concepts.

Au Bonheur des Dames might not at first seem the most interesting of Zola’s novels from the point of view of its representation of female eroticism, yet the character of Denise, precisely because of its differences with the other three which are here taken into account, presents a valid counterpoint within the theme of the reflection on sensation. Her sensual education seems to take form through the letter she receives from Mouret, and it is because of this letter and what it represents that Denise has the ability to look back to the few encounters she had previously had with him with a better understanding of her own feelings. The very fact that his desire for Denise is first expressed through a letter is what differentiates Denise’s analysis of her feelings from Hélène, Renée or Thérèse’s. What is interesting about this is the way in which Zola chose not to have the two characters confront each other directly, by giving Denise complete freedom and space to reflect upon Mouret’s advances. Furthermore, her conversation with her friend Pauline about the letter serves as a point of contrast which valorises her own chastity and strength of character. The following passage, permeated with a sense of fear of the unknown, is the most explicit rendering of Denise’s thoughts on Mouret which can be found in the novel:

Si elle tremblait encore quand il passait, elle savait maintenant que ce n’était pas de crainte; et son malaise d’autrefois, son ancienne peur ne

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130 “Feminine love is one of the forms of experience in which a conscience turns itself into an object for a being that transcends it; these are the same passive delights that the devoted young girl feels in the shadow of a church”.
Whilst Denise, as we have seen, represents a departure from other female characters in Zola’s work, mainly through his own desire not to include too many “épisodes trop sensuels” and to avoid “les scènes trop vives, qui finiraient par me spécialiser” (qtd. in Guillemin 205) in this novel, she is nevertheless firmly embedded in the discursive exploration of passion and reason. While Zola chooses to foreground Denise’s lack of experience and her resulting fear of Octave, it is her reflection on these feelings which brings her closer, not only to other characters in Zola’s own oeuvre, but also to those which can be found in New Woman texts. Denise’s simplicity and youthful inexperience mean that “la peur empêche toujours la manifestation du désir, l’amour physique restant, dans cet ouvrage, à l’arrière-plan” (Camarani 189). The novel in fact places its emphasis on the repressed, and at first misrecognised, desire within Denise. Moreover, the ending of the novel strengthens the importance given to the female character’s response to the man. Zola chooses to end the novel with Octave’s marriage proposal, and renounces depiction of her answer, her feelings and her thoughts (Guillemin 211). While some

131 “She still trembled when he was near, yet she now knew that it was not with fear, and her earlier discomfort, the old fear could only be the alarmed ignorance of love, the emotion caused by her budding affection, that she felt in her wild childishness. She did not reason, she only felt that she had always loved him, ever since she had first quivered and stuttered in front of him. […] She could have given herself to another, but she had never loved anyone but this man, who could terrify her by just looking at her”.

132 “Episodes that are too sensual”, “scenes that are too explicit, which would have the effect of encasing me within a specific genre”.

133 “Fear always prevents the manifestation of desire, physical love thus remaining, in this work, in the background”.
may argue that this is a way of denying the female character her subjectivity, placing
the emphasis on Octave’s movement towards her, I would argue that this actually
serves to highlight not his proposal, but precisely her answer. The reader is left
wondering what Denise will say, what her reaction will be, and how she will feel after
finally learning that her love is reciprocated. By excluding her voice, Zola manages to
make precisely that unheard voice the most significant aspect of the ending.

As we have seen earlier, the clash between sensation and reflection is an
essential characteristic of Zola’s depiction of female eroticism, and is deeply
inscribed within the period’s theories about gender difference. Furthermore, it is also
strengthened by the author’s powerful delineation of a struggle between instinct and
rationality which defines most of his female characters in their association with men.
It is very interesting to evaluate the way in which female passion is persistently
equated with weakness, Denise experiencing “une lâcheté délicieuse” (Au Bonheur
des Dames 351, my italics) when giving in to Mouret, and Hélène being described
as tired of her fight: “elle n’avait plus la force d’échapper à son aveu” (Une Page
d’Amour 165, my italics), “la passion était fatale, Hélène ne se défendait plus. Elle
se sentait à bout de forces contre son coeur” (Une Page d’Amour 173, my italics).

The idea of effort associated with that of passion as fire, as seen earlier, is
beautifully rendered in a passage of La Curée in which Renée spends an afternoon
in front of a blazing fire in which Maxime’s face seems to watch her, meditating upon
what has happened with her husband’s son. This is the most direct rendering of a
woman’s battle between her sensuality and her will, a battle which Renée loses
when she goes back to him. In Émile Zola, Hemmings charges the naturalist author

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134 “A delightful cowardice”.
135 “She no longer had the strength to elude her avowal”.
136 “The passion was inevitable, Hélène ceased defending herself against it. She was exhausted, and
could no longer struggle against her heart”.
with being “unaware that love between man and woman could be considered from any aspect except as a matter of appetites to be satisfied or denied” (Hemmings, Émile Zola 148), yet this is, as I hope to have demonstrated above, an unfortunate result of his determination to portray the conflicting forces within women when confronted with their sexuality.

**Desire, Love, and Animalism**

For Zola, sexual passion is not necessarily accompanied by an emotional or intellectual understanding between men and women. In *Une Page d’Amour*, Hélène, who had previously been convinced of having an attachment of similar temperaments to Henri, realises that she does not know him, that they have never had a real conversation. What is interesting about this is that it is after their sexual relationship that she will decide that it does not matter whether she knows him or not. The animalistic side of sexuality is reinforced by the fact that “Zola and the inhabitants of the Rougon-Macquart are very susceptible to olfactory sensation. His [...] style falls back on animalistic, instinctive, erotic behavior based in olfactory perceptions” (Frey 77). However, this is a trait which is more commonly encountered in the male characters. In *Thérèse Raquin*, Laurent notices the smell of Thérèse’s body on various occasions (54), the narrator of *La Curée* comments on the lingering smell which evokes Renée’s nudity in her private rooms (247, 249), and, in *Une Page d’Amour*, Henri’s first striking impression of Hélène is strongly influenced by the smell which emanates from her bed (16). Coincidentally, it is the heroine of *Thérèse Raquin*, the most instinctive of these female characters, who is influenced by her
olfactory perceptions when in the vicinity of Laurent, whose “senteurs âcres et puissantes [...] troublaient la jeune femme” (Thérèse Raquin 47).

The character of Thérèse is representative of Zola's contemporary trend to present women as a source of degeneration, given his decision to highlight repeatedly the significance of her ancestry in order to emphasise the influence of instinct and heredity in her awakening to sexuality. As in the novels from his later Rougon-Macquarts, Thérèse inherits her flaw, her nervous disposition, from her mother. Interestingly, not only is the source of her pathological “wildness” a woman, and the flaw itself passed on to another woman, but, as if to excise any further doubts about the otherness of Thérèse’s nature, she is also from “the Dark continent”, she is Algerian. Orphaned at a young age, Thérèse was taken in by her aunt, and later forced to marry her cousin, the sickly and feeble Camille, and to continue living with him and his mother. Feeling liberated from the constraints placed on her by her husband and overprotective aunt in the arms of her lover Laurent, "ses instincts de femme nerveuse éclatèrent [...] le sang de sa mere, ce sang africain qui coulait dans ses veines, se mit à couler, à battre furieusement dans son corps [...] presque vierge encore" (Thérèse Raquin 54). Sexuality and desire are thus shown to be closely linked to a person’s ancestry, and an interesting example of this can be found in the character of Louise de Mareuil, Maxime’s future wife, in La Curée. This young girl is described as feeble, almost degenerate, and as having a strange understanding of strange situations, such as when she discovers Maxime and Renée kissing. This character reinforces the concept of woman’s free attitudes to eroticism being closely linked to a degenerate ancestry and physiology. It is, furthermore, interesting to highlight how these ideas distinguish themselves from those which feminists and New

137 “Strong, acrid scent [...] disconcerted the young woman”.
138 “Her nervous woman’s instincts exploded [...] her mother’s blood, the African blood which flowed in her veins, began flowing, furiously beating in her [...] almost virgin body”. 
Woman writers would later express, and in which “notions of innate female moral superiority, for instance, were very important” (Rowold xvii).

In her discussion of Schopenhauer, de Beauvoir writes that the philosopher a raison de voir dans l’opposition sexe – cerveau l’expression de la dualité de l’homme. En tant que sujet, il pose le monde et, restant hors de l’univers qu’il pose, il s’en fait le souverain; s’il se saisit comme chair, comme sexe, il n’est plus conscience autonome, liberté transparente: il est engagé dans le monde, il est périssable. (I, 272)

Thus, the recurrence of a reflection on sensation becomes a means through which the process of thought secures the female character’s claim to subjectivity. The articulation of desire in New Woman fiction, privileging reason over instinct, shows how, as a fictional construct, the New Woman was indeed “in love with logic” (Dowie 183). Logic is that which can be justified, or validated, by reason. The recurrence of the “reflection on sensation” is a process of critical self-reflection, a way for the female character to re-claim responsibility and cognisance of her own sexuality. In both French and New Woman fiction, the recurrence of this process thus banishes the “conventional associations of the female with the body and the male with the mind” (Murphy 121), situating its protagonists within a framework which allows them not only to feel and love, but also to want, to desire, and, more importantly, to choose. I think, therefore, that what truly matters here is that both the French and British authors felt the need to emphasise the presence of the mental process within sexuality.

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139 Maupassant was famously thought to be influenced by Schopenhauer’s views, though this is usually said in relation to negative criticism of his views on women.

140 “He is right in seeing in the sex / brain opposition the expression of man’s duality. As a subject, man asserts himself in the world, and, remaining outside the universe he asserts, he rules over it; in seeing himself as flesh, as sexual, he is no longer autonomous conscience, transparent freedom: he is engaged in the world, he is perishable”.
For Bertrand-Jennings, the female characters who express their desire for a man, or, even more so, dominate him sexually, are invariably castigated in Zola’s fiction (102). Denise, the almost surreally virginal heroine of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, however, escapes this fate through the chaste love she manages to maintain with Mouret until the very end of the novel. She therefore differs from Renée, Thérèse and Hélène in that she does not engage sexually with Mouret. Thérèse’s feeble child-husband Camille, her description as a guardian angel for him in his mother’s eyes, as well as her superior strength and health throughout their childhood and during their marriage signifies a reversal, one in which Thérèse becomes more similar to an older brother, and later on a mother, to Camille. Her affair with Laurent does not restore the female and male gendered roles, but allows for her wild nature to gain greater importance and dominate her partner even further, to the point of convincing him to kill Camille. It is, however, necessary to stress that “les deux éléments du couple zolien ne sont jamais égaux. […] la femme se soumet à un maître qu’elle admire et dont elle se fait l’humble servante” (Bertrand-Jennings 117) – this is apparent, for example, in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which Denise, who admires Mouret’s flair for affairs and ultimately gains access to his heart through her understanding of his business and her support, and of Hélène in *Une Page d’Amour*, who tellingly declares her love to Henri when he saves her daughter.

We have seen how desire is, in both French and British literature, presented as an instinct that is deeply related to reason. In Dowie’s *Gallia*, desire is shown as an almost primal impulse, yet, Dowie also questions the innate character of it. Gallia is “quick to learn and to respond” (132), and the beginning of her sensual awareness is imbued with notions of the innate and the nurtured. Desire can be learnt, and is

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141 “The two elements of the couple in Zola’s work are never equal. […] the woman obeys to a master she admires and for whom she comes a humble servant”. 
formed by the events in an individual’s life. The inexperienced heroine of the novel quickly equates her “longing to be kissed” (52), her desire, with being in love with Dark Essex. Before declaring her love to him, Gallia deplores her behaviour, judging herself to have been “lower than the poor, poor women in the street” (52), the prostitute representing “the ultimate immodest woman and the embodiment of sexuality” (Bland 57). For de Beauvoir, there are two natural reactions to sexuality in women: some choose to embrace the animalism of sex completely, while for others, being loved, or in love, is the only way to serenely give themselves to a man (II, 547). For Gallia, a higher feeling towards Dark Essex thus serves as some sort of validation, and exculpation, of her longing. The function of “love” is fully recognised by Grand’s Ideala, who characteristically exclaims “Love! […] There is little enough of that in the business that goes by its name now-a-days. I am a lady – I cannot use the right word. But it is none the less the thing I mean” (725), drawing attention to the semantic switching of the two concepts. Indeed, this semantic substitution becomes all the more significant with the realisation that the New Woman writers, as “ladies”, could not use the right word either. The usage of “love” to sublimate desire had a sociological dimension: “sexual passion was a key dimension of [nineteenth-century middle-class culture], but […] was usually in conflict with social codes of respectability and larger impulses of ‘civilisation’” (Garton 120).\footnote{Refer to the third chapter for my discussion of the usage of “love” in the fiction depicting prostitutes.} Yet, proper conduct was not solely responsible for the superimposition of love on desire, as closer examination reveals. Moreover, this process is also found in the French, male-authored novels. Both the French and British authors show how love legitimates desire by associating it with its nobler, more civilised qualities. As Angelica tells the Tenor in *The Heavenly Twins*, “the best pleasures in life are […] not in animalism”
It is in the name of her past love for him that Dark Essex feels legitimated to kiss Gallia, and it is also in the name of love, and truth, that she takes the bold step of declaring her love to him. Love takes on the role of a purifying force, and in its opposition to sex, is constructed as a product of culture. Tradition and gendered expectations were such that, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was quite usual for a young woman to believe she had fallen in love with the first man who showed her attention. In *The Heavenly Twins*, Mosley is “an eligible”, and this is enough for Edith’s “heart to swell with a sensation like enthusiasm” (157, my italics). Ideala asks “I have been wondering what makes it possible for a woman to love a man? Not the flesh that she sees and can touch, though that may attract her […]. It must be the mind that is in him” (2480). She feels a strong sexual and intellectual attraction for Lorrimer, but Grand makes her choose reason. Furthermore, in deciding to stay with her husband, Ideala is not only choosing the moral thing to do, but is in reality privileging that “mental love” with Lorrimer, which would not degrade despite their separation.

Nature is thwarted by the conventional behaviour that is expected of women, in which the expression of love is intensified and the attention to desire diminished, placing the emphasis on sentiment rather than sensation. Once again, sensation takes centre stage in yet another dilemma constructed as a binary opposition, romantic feeling impeding the expression of the physical. In *Gallia*, Mark Gurdon declares that there exist three kinds of attraction: intellectual, physical and romantic (109), interestingly situating the intricacy of desire within the mind, the body, and the feeling of love. I feel that the expression of a possibility of experiencing one or more of these attractions simultaneously confers their truly revolutionary aspect to both the French and British representations of female sexuality. Indeed, whilst these different
kinds of attraction may be misguidedly intertwined, their correlation remains inevitable. De Beauvoir considers that bad faith permeates woman’s conception, and perception, of her partner’s “love”, stating that “elle prend le désir pour de l’amour, l’érection pour le désir, l’amour pour une religion” (II, 561). While her emphasis here is on the woman’s flawed understanding of the man’s perception of her, I think this idea also helps to gain a deeper understanding of desire’s relation to love. The female character feels that there has to be something more than just sex.

Female desire is often checked by the need to legitimise the character’s sexual impulses. In the French fiction, love’s justification of a woman’s sexual impulses takes on a different meaning. The idea of love is in fact approached from a very different angle within the characters of Zola and Maupassant’s œuvre. In his preface to Thérèse Raquin’s second edition, Zola describes the novel’s ambition to elaborate an “étude du tempérament et des modifications profondes de l’organisme sous la pression des milieux et des circonstances” (16). This intention becomes evident throughout the novel, as well as within La Curée and Une Page d’Amour, through a constant need to explain women and their sexuality, to understand them by the use of a systematic recounting and analysis, which can almost be seen as an inventory, of their childhood impressions and feelings and the moment or events which take them into adulthood.

Through the passages in which Thérèse’s education is described, we understand that her animalistic and savage nature had been thwarted by her aunt due to her cousin’s illness. Although Thérèse is often presented as a wild creature, almost an animal, during her childhood, the contrast between her exterior aspect and behaviour and her interior life, as well as what she allows herself to do when she is

143 “She mistakes his desire for love, his erection for desire, and love for religion”.
144 “A study of temperament, and of the profound changes which take place in the body under the pressure of milieu and circumstance”.


alone and when she is with her aunt and cousin, betray a strong personality and an even stronger will. Educated to obey and be submissive, her spirit stays the same despite the need to pretend otherwise. It is interesting to note how Zola chooses to signify that she is unveiling her true nature, as opposed to discovering a newfound sexuality, contrary to Renée and Hélène, in passages such as the following: “au premier baiser, elle se révéla courtisane. Son corps inassouvi se jeta éperdument dans la volupté. Elle s'éveillait comme d'un songe” (Thérèse Raquin 54, my italics). The first description of Laurent seems almost directly shown through Thérèse's own eyes, and the very physical nature of this man, the sheer force which he conveys through his mere presence are indeed an awakening for her neglected sensuality: “elle n'avait jamais vu un homme” (Thérèse Raquin 42). The duplicity of the female character is extremely significant as it can also be found in the character of Renée in La Curée, for example. In this case, as I have briefly mentioned earlier, Renée is torn between what she is by nature, an honest bourgeoise, and what her life and situation have made her, an insatiable pleasure seeker, with an “amant assorti aux modes et aux folies de l'époque” (La Curée 259).

Motherhood

De Beauvoir compares the feelings aroused within the woman in love to those within the mother:

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145 “From the first kiss, she gave herself away as a courtesan. Her unappeased body plunged frantically into voluptuousness. It was as if she was waking from a dream”.
146 “She had never seen a man”.
147 “Lover matching the fashions and the folly of the period”.

Comme l’amoureuse, la mère s’enchantée de se sentir nécessaire; elle est justifiée par les exigences auxquelles elle répond; mais ce qui fait la difficulté et la grandeur de l’amour maternel, c’est qu’il n’implique pas de réciprocité [...]; elle n’attend aucune récompense en échange de ses dons, c’est à sa propre liberté de les justifier. (Beauvoir II, 367)

In Cecil’s reflections on Theodora’s body, it becomes a site within which the objectification of the female body is depicted as being twofold, his observations about her unfitness to become a mother relating to her slight hip (10) and “a breast with little suggestion of the duties or powers of Nature” (24) being closely set against his appreciation of her as a potential sexual partner. “Theodora was as unfitted [...] to become a co-worker with me in carrying out Nature’s aim, as she was fitted to give me [...] the strongest personal pleasure” (24). The periodical press often portrayed “the New Woman [...] as a danger to the continuance of the ‘race’, in the guise of a potential mother of physically weak and mentally feeble children” (Ledger, Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle 31). In this particular short story, Victoria Cross manages to use this image in order to emphasise the possibility, and, furthermore, the significance of, non-reproductive sexuality. Despite this, and the story’s apparent omitting of issues related to the idea of motherhood, a very strong statement comes forth from Cecil’s purely sensual attraction to Theodora. By stating that “our strongest [...] passions [...] are constantly not those suitable to, nor in accordance with, the ends of Nature” (20), the narrator draws attention to the contrast between such a view, and, for example, Gallia’s rejection of Dark Essex as a partner. The

148 “Like the woman in love, the mother is delighted to feel necessary; she is justified by the needs to which she responds; but what constitutes the difficulty and the greatness of maternal love, is that it does not imply reciprocity [...]; she does not expect compensation in exchange for her gifts, it is her own freedom that justifies them”.

intrinsic differences between man and woman are emphasised by the depiction of a man’s entitlement, or possibility, to ignore and disregard his role within procreation in favour of the pursuit of pleasure, whereas motherhood “is still the only real fulfilment for women” (Stubbs 123).

Happiness is seen as the result of a woman’s experience of motherhood, which is also linked to a woman’s beauty, an idea which is repeated in the story about Dr. Galbraith’s hysterical patient, who is pictured with a baby when she reappears cured and happy (Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* 574). This, in fact, exemplifies “the need for a healthy equilibrium between physical and spiritual needs” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 36), the woman affected from hysteria apparently satisfied sexually, but, more importantly, within her role as a *mother*. Motherhood not only elevates women to their highest potential, but also creates strong bonds between them: Edith’s “sweet maternal instinct […] set up a yearning which softened her heart the more tenderly toward the mother because of the child” (Grand 169) when she remembers the young French girl they had found by the side of the road. This is a theme which is also perceived in Angelica and Evadne’s reactions to Edith’s deformed baby. In Grand’s novel, the cultivation, or, more precisely, the possibility of cultivating such bonds, appears as a higher, purer form of attachment than that which is depicted between man and woman.

Whilst many New Woman novels written in the same period place a strong emphasis on the importance of women’s education, Gallia approaches this theme from an entirely different perspective. The coming of age of such heroines, as, for example, *The Heavenly Twins*’ Evadne is delineated within a traditional trajectory which takes them from childhood into adolescence, and finally adulthood and marriage. Furthermore, the moment many of these female characters become “adult”
often coincides with the moment in which they marry, the moment in which they are
passed on from the care of their father to that of their husband. Gallia, however,
enables the novel’s focus on female sexuality to permeate its main character’s
“education”. Whilst none of Gallia’s childhood or adolescence is depicted, it is
important to note that she is introduced into the novel when she comes home from
Oxford, after her education. It is not through an emphasis on her studious
personality, or the influence of Romantic novels on her imagination that Gallia’s
personality is forged under the reader’s watchful eye. The events which mark a
turning point and a tangible change in this character are two very distinct, at first
seemingly disconnected, yet thoroughly intertwined episodes. The first is her first
sensuous conversation with Dark Essex, and the subsequent awakening to love and
desire; the second is the death of Lady Hamesthwaite. Marked by the revelation of
desire and the loss of her mother, confronted thus by the “wreckage of her creeds”
(90), Gallia’s reflections turn themselves to the relationship between mother and
child, and the importance of motherhood in a woman’s life. What is interesting here
is her position, which, based on the experiences witnessed by the reader, centres
itself on the desire to know which, between love and motherhood, is “better suited” to
a woman. This choice necessarily gives way to the question which delineates much
of the novel’s representation of female sexuality – “love or motherhood?” (92). The
novel’s representation of Gallia’s discovery of sexuality and, on the other hand, her
desire for motherhood in the most eugenic of terms represents the quest for the full
sexual potential of a “mother-woman” (37). Gallia’s character is thus constructed
through what could be termed as a “sexual-eugenic” education, given the
superposition of two events which effectively define Dowie’s novel as “the romance
plot that eugenists were seeking to rewrite” (Richardson, Love and Eugenics in the
Late Nineteenth Century, 86), in which “sexual selection displaced love” (Richardson, “The Eugenization of Love” 239). Gallia’s thoughts on motherhood will effectively prevent her from marrying the man she loves and therefore from leading a full and satisfying sexual life, with the possibility of sex being lived for its own sake, rather than as a means of forwarding the race. As Richardson points out, “eugenic feminists […] sought to rewrite love along rational lines, excising passion and privileging desirable offspring: the eugenisation of love” (Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century, 185).

Zola’s characters are ambiguous in their roles as mothers – in La Curée, Renée is the stepmother of a boy she treats as a friend, and later a lover; in Au Bonheur des Dames, Denise is forced by circumstance to act as a mother to her two brothers; in Une Page d’Amour, Hélène has a sick child whose illness causes her to be morbidly attached to her; Renée and Thérèse both suffer miscarriages. The question Gallia sought to answer is the very same that Zola had posed in Une Page d’Amour, almost twenty years earlier. The character of Hélène is in fact described, from the beginning of the novel, almost exclusively in terms of her motherhood and her care of her ill daughter, Jeanne. The importance of Hélène, of woman as mother, is extrapolated to Hélène’s relationship with her husband, “son mari, qu’elle soignait comme un enfant” (83), and towards whom she was “indulgente et maternelle” (82).149 This can perhaps be explained by Zola’s personal conception of sexuality, which until much later in life he did not conceive of when removed from the context of reproduction.150 What Lanoux termed a study of “l’amour charnel chez une femme

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149 “The husband, whom she cared for as for a child”, “indulgent and maternal”.

150 After being married for eighteen years to his wife, Alexandrine, Zola began an affair with a young woman named Jeanne Rozerot, almost thirty years his junior, in 1888. He had two children with Jeanne, and when, in 1891, his wife discovered the affair, the couple was on the verge of divorce. In the end, Alexandrine came to accept Zola’s second family, and even succeeded in securing Zola’s legal recognition of his and Jeanne’s children, after his death in 1902. While my work does not
froide” (Lanoux v) presents Gallia’s dilemma to Hélène in the form of a choice to be made between her daughter, Jeanne, and her lover, Henri Deberle, of a “lutte entre sa maternité et son amour” (240). Zola’s decision to make Hélène a widowed mother who had never experienced passion is central to the extremely effective mother / lover dichotomy which is found within this character, who, as a result of this, experiences the very same dilemma as Gallia. This opposition is emphasised by the image of “Marie vierge et mère” (198) in the church, which mirrors Hélène herself before her life’s “page d’amour” broke that equilibrium. For her, Henri’s situation as a married man transforms his declaration into “les paroles qui emportaient toute sa vie passée d’épouse et de mère” (169), given the impossibility of her love for him ever being as legitimate as her being a mother to Jeanne. Furthermore, the child’s inherited neurosis – she is Tante Dide’s granddaughter – enables the depictions of her jealous crises to illustrate the way in which “the child’s possessive passion for her mother fights desperately against the wave of sexual passion which momentarily sweeps

Although I do not emphasise religion in my study of Zola, it is important to briefly note its role in the author’s œuvre, and particularly in relation to his conception of motherhood. Philip D. Walker writes that Zola was “always interested in the sociology of religion” (Walker 3), and in La Religion de Zola: Naturalisme et Déchristianisation, Sophie Guermès maintains that Zola’s work posits heredity as a modern interpretation of the myth of the original sin. Zola’s later novels, and especially the cycle of the Quatre Évangiles, on which he worked from 1898 until his death in 1902 – the first three, Fécondité, Travail and Vérité, were published, but Justice remained unfinished – highlight “his struggle to create an acceptable new religion or philosophical religion-substitute” (Walker 26). In Fécondité (1899), Zola addresses the problem of contraception, which he had hinted at in an earlier article, published in Le Figaro in May 1896, in which he declared that “rien n’est si beau, […] rien n’est si fort, comme les nombreuses familles” (n.p.). This newfound strength of his attitude towards the family was, doubtless, influenced by his affair with Jeanne Rozerot, see n. 109. Indeed, his later novels present strong, pure female figures, who much resemble Au Bonheur des Dames’s Denise, yet the value he attributes to sensual love geared towards reproduction makes the comparison with the figure of the Virgin Mary more problematic.

“Carnal love for a cold woman”.
“Her struggle between maternity and love”.
“Mary, virgin and mother”.

“Carnal love for a cold woman”.
“Her struggle between maternity and love”.
“Mary, virgin and mother”.

“Carnal love for a cold woman”.
“Her struggle between maternity and love”.
“Mary, virgin and mother”.

“Carnal love for a cold woman”.
“Her struggle between maternity and love”.
“Mary, virgin and mother”.
Hélène off her feet” (Hemmings, Émile Zola 131), placing further emphasis on this struggle. Jeanne’s illness, however, does momentarily allow for an idyllic interweaving of “mère” and “amante” (221), as her lover is also her daughter’s doctor. Hélène’s neglect of her daughter, to spend time with Henri, will eventually lead to Jeanne’s death. Une Page d’Amour concludes itself on a particularly moralising ending, permeated by what many critics consider to be Zola’s conception of sexuality as reproductive. “[H]is loathing for illicit sexual relationships” (Frey 79) and Hélène’s desire to have, and thus to be, everything, result in her punishment. She finds herself childless, her affair ends, and she marries a man who kisses her marble-like, irresponsible feet, in the same way her first husband did. The ending manages to convey a sense of despair, as Hélène has lost both her roles. However, I believe that the novel’s tragic ending actually, and perhaps unwittingly, serves to convey the need to find a balance between the status of the chaste wife/caring mother and that of the sexual lover. After everything Hélène has been through, one is disappointed by the cyclic progression of the novel. It seems to me that Zola’s novel questions the compartmentalisation of women’s roles and points to the author’s engagement in the breakdown of the dichotomies surrounding female sexuality.

The heroines of La Curée and Thérèse Raquin both suffer miscarriages, Renée from natural causes, and Thérèse as a result of a beating which she herself incites from Laurent. Thérèse’s refusal to have a child from Laurent, and her brutal way of avoiding it, seem to be part of the same ideology which kills Hélène’s daughter, Jeanne, in Une Page d’Amour. Moreover, Renée’s incestuous role as a stepmother to Maxime further indicates Zola’s desire to equate real, true motherhood only within the pure and selfless woman in the four novels analyzed in this study. This

156 “Mother” and “lover”.
is stressed by Maxime, whose reason to stay with her is that “elle était maternelle, elle payait pour lui, elle le tirerait d’embarras, si quelque créancier se fâchait” (303)\textsuperscript{157}. The character of Denise Baudu, however, seems to represent an ideal of motherhood. Virginal and kind, she has had to care for her two brothers as if they were two sons, and throughout the novel, she repeatedly refers to them as “les enfants”, the children. The contrast between the other young women who work at the Bonheur and her own virtue appears when they mistake her brother for a lover, and she is left without a job because of it. Mouret’s admiration of her, coupled with their sexless love, enables an exaltation of the qualities of Denise as a mother. Motherhood, however, is not always represented as an entirely positive, rewarding experience. De Beauvoir makes a very interesting point when she highlights that

Les femmes qui sont profondément coquettes, qui se saisissent essentiellement comme objet érotique, qui s’aîment dans la beauté de leur corps, souffrent de se voir déformées, enlaidies, incapables de susciter le désir. La grossesse ne leur apparaît pas […] comme […] un enrichissement, mais comme une diminution de leur moi. (II, 355)\textsuperscript{158}

Zola’s saga needs procreation to carry through his fictional family, but Maupassant shows the narcissistic, childless woman in Notre Coeur’s Mme de Burne. The novel questions many aspects of desire and attraction, yet never mentions maternity, and in this respect illustrates de Beauvoir’s idea.

\textsuperscript{157} “She was maternal, she paid for him, and would get him out of trouble, if he should fall out with a creditor”.
\textsuperscript{158} “Women who are profoundly coquettish, who essentially see themselves as erotic objects, who love themselves through the beauty of their body, suffer when they see themselves deformed, made ugly, incapable of provoking desire. They do not see pregnancy as an enriching experience, but as a diminishing of their Self”.
Conclusion

This chapter has shed light on several key ideas about the representation of female sexuality in New Woman Fiction and French naturalist and realist literature. These authors in fact share many common themes and preoccupations, and, as in the case of the representations of feeling and thought, show similarities in their awareness of the conflicts inherent to women’s experience of sexuality. Having established the major ideas and themes present in the fiction of my chosen New Woman and French authors, I will, in the next chapter, consider the representation of female sexual awakening. Many ideas which have been addressed in this chapter will reappear, lending greater depth to these representations.
Chapter Two | Le Réveil et l’Éveil Sexuel: Representing Female Sexual Awakening in French and British Fiction

L’expérience érotique est une de celles qui découvrent aux êtres humains de la façon la plus poignante l’ambiguïté de leur condition; ils s’y éprouvent comme chair et comme esprit, comme l’autre et comme sujet. C’est pour la femme que ce conflit revêt le caractère le plus dramatique parce qu’elle se saisit d’abord comme objet, qu’elle ne trouve pas tout de suite dans le plaisir une sûre autonomie. (Beauvoir II, 188)

In this extract from Le Deuxième Sexe, de Beauvoir emphasises the inherent ambiguity that characterises women’s sexuality. Again, the idea of reflection and sensation, or “chair et esprit”, “spirit and flesh”, reasserts itself. In addition to this, de Beauvoir also opposes the ideas of objectivity and subjectivity. In her view, the sexual experience is the moment in which this opposition is felt most acutely by women. These issues will be a recurrent theme throughout this chapter. As the route traditionally offered to women by society in the nineteenth century (Beauvoir II, 219), marriage was virtually the only destiny offered to women. Both socially and sexually, a woman’s life and fate were highly dependent on her choice of husband and her relationship with him. But just how cognisant was woman of the true implications of this institution? While her youth was often spent dreaming of the man she would meet and marry, just how much did she really know about how intimate her

159 “The erotic experience is among those which reveal most poignantly to human beings the ambiguity of their condition; in it, they become aware of themselves [...] as other and subject. This conflict is all the more dramatic for woman because she sees herself as an object and does not find a sure autonomy in enjoyment of sex at first”.

160 From Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856), whose main character’s desires are moulded by the romantic novels of Walter Scott, to the fiction that this study deals with, the young girl’s rêverie is a recurrent motif, central to representations of female sexuality, desire, and sexual awakening. The disillusionment and sense of emptiness that follow marriage - “elle s’aperçut qu’elle n’avait plus rien à faire, plus jamais rien à faire. Toute sa jeunesse au couvent avait été préoccupée de l’avenir, affairée de songeries. La continuelle agitation de ses espérances emplissait, en ce temps-là, ses heures”
relationship with this man was meant to be? Moving from her mother and father’s home to her husband’s, a woman’s life was lived between two places, neither of which truly belonged to her. Thus, if the marriage was a failure, the only viable solution was to return to the parents’ home. The importance of the marriage plot and its bearing on the representation of female sexuality from mid- to late-nineteenth century cannot be overstated. As Holbrook Jackson noted in *The Eighteen Nineties*, “the popular novel of the past [...] ended more or less happily with the sound of wedding bells. The new novel very often began there”. (271) I would like to focus on the problematic issue of female sexuality, which I have now scrutinised from a number of different angles, within the framework of marriage and in the fiction of Sarah Grand, Ménie Muriel Dowie, George Egerton, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. My main concern is here to examine how the issues of sexual awakening and satisfaction within marriage were portrayed in both novels and short stories of the period. I will address the question in four stages, focussing on the idea of sexual awakening, happiness in marriage, female sexual subjectivity and adultery.

**Sexual Awakening**

“Les mœurs rendent encore difficile l’affranchissement sexuel de la célibataire; [...] si elle voulait prendre un amant, il fallait d’abord qu’elle se mariât” (Beauvoir II, (Maupassant, *Une Vie* 104-5), “elle s’était donnée, liée pour la vie, [...] elle avait renoncé à toute autre espérance, à tous les projets entrevus, à tout l’inconnu de demain” (Maupassant, *Une Vie* 146), “living out her quiet years, each day a replica of the one gone before” (Egerton, “Virgin Soil” 105) – gives rise to a quest for satisfaction, which often results either in sexual gratification in adultery, or in the re-thinking of the female character’s sexuality as motherhood. More on this will be said later on in the chapter.

161 Significantly, what truly demarks one “place” from the other is precisely sexuality, and the woman’s relationship with man.

162 In *Une Vie*, Jeanne asks herself “Que faire? Une idée l’illumina – retourner, avec père et petite mère, à Rouen, comme autrefois’(Maupassant 139) – “What to do? An idea illuminated her – to return to Rouen, with father and little mother, as in the days gone by”, my translation. Similarly, yet more audacious in her purpose, the heroine of “Virgin Soil” retraces her steps into adulthood by returning to her mother’s home before leaving her husband and beginning a new life.
Writing in 1949, de Beauvoir was describing the contemporary situation of women. The idea of a subordinacy of female sexuality to marriage is one that can be found and which constantly returns in mid- to late- nineteenth-century fiction. In *Hygiène et Physiologie du Mariage* (1849), Auguste Debay expressed this very same idea when he wrote that “marriage is the only means to channel the genital instinct and to subject it to a moral purpose; it alone can regulate and moderate venereal appetites” (175). Rather than merely expressing the subordinacy of sexuality to marriage, Debay’s work, mirroring the prevalent opinion of the period, also emphasises marriage’s power to “moralise” the sexual act. Sexuality within marriage was in fact a problematic issue: how could the image of the pure “Angel in the house” be reconciled with that of a loving, sensual wife in the bedroom? Many women, and particularly so in the middle or higher classes, did not have a sexual life until they were married. I will begin by focussing on the ideas of desire, sexual initiation, and sexual awakening. An important distinction needs to be made between the concepts of sexual “initiation” and “awakening”. To avoid semantic confusion, the expression “sexual initiation” will refer to the “entry” of the woman into the sexual world, that is, to her first sexual experiences, whilst “sexual awakening” will refer to the beginning of a sensual and sexual awareness, regardless of whether she has had a sexual experience, or not. It is important to acknowledge sexual awakening as an independent impulse within woman, one that is not instigated by man:

> Il n’est pas vrai, comme on l’a prétendu parfois, que la vierge ne connaisse pas le désir et que ce soit l’homme qui éveille sa sensualité;

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163 “The sexual emancipation of unmarried women is made difficult by social customs. […] If she wished to take a lover, she had to get married first”.

164 “Monogamy […] does [not] enter history as a reconciliation of man and wife and still less as the highest form of marriage. On the contrary, it enters as the *subjugation of one sex by the other*, as the proclamation of an *antagonism between the sexes*” (Engels 79, my italics).
This is a crucial point to this study’s distinction between the ideas of initiation and awakening. I think the French words “éveil” and “réveil” express this distinction even more clearly, terms which are, unfortunately, both translated as “awakening” in English, yet perfectly express the nuance. In the first chapter, the focus was on the interconnectedness of reflection and desire in the very same texts that are considered here. This chapter will re-examine those texts with a narrower, and altogether different, focus on the sexual experience itself, and, more precisely, on the influence the institution of marriage has on it, and the significance of the different roles that are played by man and woman within it.

How did these authors express the concept of a sexual awakening, and were there any similarities between the French and British fiction that is the focus of this study? Sarah Grand “was no sexual radical” (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* 34), yet her heroines, not unlike Zola and Maupassant’s, were granted the independence of their own sexual awakening. “Combining her virulent critique of contemporary (male) sexual morality with a startlingly modern, sensual exploration of female desire” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 14), and despite her open disapproval of the sexual explicitness of Zola, Grand gave her characters room to experience that “individual” sexual awakening which is central to these representations of a woman’s adulthood. A good example of this is the character of Edith, who, during Mosley’s courting, realises that “some great change in herself had

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165 “It is not true, as some have claimed, that the virgin is unacquainted with sexual desire and that the man must awaken her sensually; this legend, once again, betrays the man’s appetite for domination, his wish that she should in no way, even in her desire for him, be autonomous”.

taken place since [...] she would not define it; she imagined she could not; but she knew what it was all the same, and rejoiced" (Grand 168). As de Beauvoir writes, “la plupart des jeunes filles appellent fiévreusement des caresses avant qu’aucune main les ait jamais effleurées. [...] Ce qu’il y a plutôt, c’est que [...] la vierge ne sait pas exactement ce qu’elle veut” (Beauvoir II, 150-1). The rise of what is still an unknown and unnameable feeling is therefore embodied within Edith, who represents the purest form of womanhood in the novel, and also within Evadne, who, despite not having relations with her husband, cannot help but feel an attraction that she fights to suppress. What is significant here is that the virgin’s attraction does not come from knowledge of the sexual act, nor does it come from the husband’s caresses, but from the female character herself, and therefore from what is ultimately presented as a natural process in the coming-of-age of such heroines. Some would no doubt argue that Zola and Maupassant do not allow for such female sexual autonomy. Zola’s, in my opinion, undue reputation as somewhat misogynistic, and his contemporary infamous status as an almost pornographic writer have contributed to what has sometimes been a misleading view of his treatment of the female experience of sexuality and desire. If we are to think about the rather complex and different ways in which Zola chooses to represent female sexual awakening, for example, it is necessary to consider to what the detractors of Zola as “writer of women” would object. It is true that some of his heroines seem to attain a sexual plenitude through men – Thérèse through Laurent, and Renée through Maxime, for example – thus making them cases of sexual initiation, as opposed to awakening. As I hope to demonstrate, however, the sexual autonomy given to these characters in the depictions of their sexual awakening is in fact undeniable. A distinction between

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166 “Most young girls long heatedly for caresses before they have even felt the caressing hand. [...] The truth is that [...] the virgin does not know exactly what she wants.”
the independent nature of the sexual awakening and the initiation by a male sexual partner is more nuanced in the fiction of the French author than it is in New Woman texts. In *Thérèse Raquin*, the novel's eponymous heroine has a very physical affair with her husband's friend, Laurent. At first glance, it would be possible to say that it is *Laurent* who instigates her furious sexuality. In his preface to the novel's second edition, in 1868, Zola's insistence on his study of human temperament and the importance of heredity, of characters whom he describes as "souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang [...] [et] les poussées de l'instinct" (12), however, emphasises the idea that a woman's sexual behaviour is indeed an intrinsic characteristic of her Self: “toute une passion qui dormait dans sa chair assoupie” (Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* 270, my italics). The woman does not become a passionate, sexual being, but unveils herself as a passionate lover, seemingly only needing the appropriate circumstances to - "au premier baiser, elle se révéla courtisane. [...] Elle s'éveillait comme d'un songe"(Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* 54, my italics). Furthermore, it is interesting to compare Thérèse’s sexual awakening with that of Denise in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. In this novel, Denise repeatedly resists Mouret's advances, refusing to become one of the many female employees of the store seduced by him. Eventually, Mouret proposes to her at the end of the novel. The novel never portrays the sexual relation that will eventually happen when they marry, yet Zola provides a deep analysis of Denise’s gradual realisation of her feelings for Mouret. Similarly to Edith in *The Heavenly Twins*, Denise feels desire for Mouret, yet does now thoroughly understand it. In her case, however, her purity is

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167 “Completely dominated by their nerves and their blood, [...] [and] the pressures of instinct”.
168 “A whole world of passion asleep in her drowsy flesh”.
169 “From the first kiss, she gave her courtesan self away. [...] She seemed to wake from a dream”. In this case, it is necessary, I think, to differentiate the naturalist goal to demonstrate the transmission of hereditary defects from one generation to the next and the implied evil of woman from what is my focus here, the female character and the various representations of sexual awakening.
emphasised by the fact that, even without having tasted the pleasures and luxuries of life, she already feels tired of them:

son imagination l'emportait, tâchait de deviner les choses, évoquait les plaisirs sans cesse contés devant elle [...]. Toute une fatigue d'esprit lui en restait, un désir mêlé de lassitude; et il lui semblait être déjà rassasiée de ces amusements, dont elle n'avait jamais goûté. (173)

Although the pleasures evoked are not explicitly sexual here, it is implicit that the conversations she hears around her are those of her promiscuous colleagues. Her behaviour is misunderstood around her. Her colleague Bourdoncle assumes that elle jouait un rôle, le plus habile des rôles; car, si elle s'était livrée au premier jour, Mouret sans doute l'aurait oubliée le lendemain; tandis que, en se refusant, elle avait fouetté son désir, elle le rendait fou [...]. Une [...] fille de vice savant n'aurait pas agi d'une autre façon que cette innocente. (384)

Denise is not playing a part. She finally comes to the full realisation of her love for Mouret at the end of the novel, and the fact that Zola does not depict the sexual relationship between them heightens the sense of her own sexual awakening.

In Maupassant’s Une Vie, Jeanne could, similarly to the heroine in Thérèse Raquin, be considered as obtaining her “sexual initiation” through Julien. In truth, she is given complete sovereignty over her sexuality. Shocked during her wedding night, then disgusted with sex during part of her honeymoon, as was the case with many

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170 “Her imagination transported her, trying to guess things, evoking the pleasures that were constantly discussed around her. [...] Her mind would tire of it, a desire mingled with weariness; and she felt that she was already satiated with these pleasures, which she had never tasted”.

171 “She was playing a role, the most clever of roles; if she had given herself on the first day, Mouret would no doubt have forgotten her the very next day; however, by refusing to, she had aroused his desire, she was driving him crazy [...]. A [...] girl of the streets [a prostitute] would not have acted differently from this innocent”.

women at the time\(^\text{172}\), her sexual awakening comes to her, not as a reaction to her husband’s “skills” or as a result of their love, but as a spontaneous reaction of happiness triggered by the nature surrounding them:

Soudain Jeanne eut une *inspiration d’amour*. [...] et tout à coup elle poussa un cri, frappée, comme de la foudre, par *la sensation qu’elle appelait*. [...] Lorsqu’ils furent seuls dans la chambre, elle tremblait de rester encore insensible sous ses baisers. Mais elle se rassura bien vite; et ce fut sa première nuit d’amour. (Maupassant 99-100, my italics)\(^\text{173}\)

Maupassant, and, to an extent, even Zola recognise that, as de Beauvoir writes,

[I]l ne suffit pas à la jeune fille de *se laisser faire* [...]. Une active participation lui est demandée dans une aventure que ni son corps vierge ni sa conscience encombrée de tabous, d’interdits, de préjugés, d’exigences, ne veulent positivement. (II, 156)\(^\text{174}\)

This active participation seems to be rendered possible only when the sexual awakening comes from the woman herself. Elaine Showalter emphasi ses the contradictions inherent to female sexuality at the time:

educated to believe that woman’s chief superiority to man lay in her greater spirituality and passionlessness, even advanced feminist

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\(^{172}\) “En Angleterre, rapporte Havelock Ellis, une dame demanda à six femmes mariées de la classe moyenne, intelligentes, leur réaction pendant la nuit de noces: pour toutes le coût était survenu comme un choc; deux d’entre elles ignoraient tout; les autres croyaient savoir mais n’en furent pas moins psychiquement blessées”. (Beauvoir II, 245-6). “In England, Havelock Ellis reported that a lady asked six intelligent, married, middle-class women, about their reaction during the wedding night: for all six, intercourse came as a shock; two of them were completely ignorant, and the others thought they knew, yet were, nevertheless, psychologically injured”.

\(^{173}\) “Suddenly Jeanne felt an inspiration of love. [...] and all of a sudden she let out a cry, struck, as if by lightning, by the sensation she yearned for. [...] When they returned, alone, to their room, she shook with the fear of remaining insensitive to his kisses once more. But she soon felt reassured, and that was her first night of love”.

\(^{174}\) “It is not enough for the young girl to *let herself go* [...]. An active participation is demanded of her in an adventure that neither her virgin body nor her mind, overcome by taboos, prohibitions, prejudice, and demands, positively desire”.

thinkers of the *Fin-de-Siècle* found it difficult to reconcile their vision of a new social order with an acceptance or endorsement of female sexuality. (*Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* 21)

The real difference between New Women and French naturalist and realist authors in their depiction of woman’s sexual awakening does not lie, as we have seen, in the recognition of a woman’s capability of developing into an erotic creature, which is what actually brings them together. Moreover, Grand’s portrayal of the independent sexual awakening is influenced by her own belief that “passion is not the best sentiment with which to begin housekeeping” (386), as she wrote in an 1898 article on the marriage question in fiction.¹⁷⁵ In this article, she emphasises the difference between passion as a physical and selfish impulse which cannot ultimately last, and love as a nurturing, caring, essentially selfless feeling that is projected onto the other person. Simultaneously depicting what Ann Heilmann has termed her “ethic of sexual self-denial” (*New Woman Strategies* 52) with a sexual awareness in her female characters, I would say that Grand does not disavow the importance of sexuality, but, rather, sees it as secondary to a more sentimental and intellectual understanding between husband and wife. The concern that returns, again and again, in New Woman fiction, is that of the importance of female sexual education. This was one of Sarah Grand’s main objectives when depicting Edith’s death after contracting syphilis from her husband, for example. In “The Modern Man and Maid”, Grand states that “a girl has a right to demand of those in authority over her the knowledge requisite to enable her to choose a husband properly when the time comes” (314). The consequences of such a bad “choice,” and the need for

¹⁷⁵ Maupassant echoes this idea in “Impudence”, a short story about a young married couple. At the beginning, their relationship is a “rage sensuelle et infatigable” (266, “sensual, unfaltering rage”), but they soon begin to feel bored with one another (266).
preparation and education are also what George Egerton expresses in her short story, “Virgin Soil” (1894). In it, an unnamed female character returns to her mother’s home five years after she gets married to tell her how unhappy she has been and that this is her fault, for not educating her thoroughly and explaining the true meaning of marriage to her. The character’s bitterness does not impede her awareness of the intrinsic nature of eroticism. She does not “disown” or “dismiss” her own sexuality and female body, she does not deny it or profess disgust towards it, but insists on the negative impact that ignorance has had on her sexual awakening and enjoyment instead:

I ought to have known, everything that concerned me and the life I was bound to lead as a wife, my physical needs, my coming passion, the very meaning of my sex, my wifehood and motherhood to follow. [...] You sent me out to fight the biggest battle of a woman’s life, the one in which she ought to know every turn of the game, with a white gauze. (111, my italics)

The debates on female sexual awakening and education converge on the issue of “[l]a ‘nuit de noces’ qui livre la vierge à un homme que d’ordinaire elle n’a pas vraiment choisi, et qui prétend résumer en quelques heures – ou quelques instants – toute l’initiation sexuelle” (Beauvoir II, 156).176

Education was a recurring concern in relation to the wedding night in literature. The insistence of New Women writers on the importance of sexual education for women is not shared by Zola, but can be found in Maupassant’s Une Vie, which startlingly addresses the same concerns New Woman writers sought to

176 “The wedding night, which surrenders the virgin to a man whom, ordinarily, she has not really chosen, and which is supposed to thoroughly encapsulate in a few hours – or moments – her sexual initiation”.

expose. At the very last moment before she leaves with her new husband, Jeanne’s father is obliged to give her the talk that her mother is not able to:

Il est des mystères qu’on cache soigneusement aux [...] filles [...] qui doivent rester pures jusqu’à l’heure où nous les remettons entre les bras de l’homme qui prendra soin de leur bonheur. C’est à lui qu’appartient de lever ce voilejeté sur le doux secret de la vie. Mais elles, si aucun soupçon ne les a encore effleurées, se révoltent souvent devant la réalité un peu brutale cachée derrière les rêves.

Blessées en leur âme, blessées même en leur corps, elles refusent à l’époux ce que la loi, la loi humaine et la loi naturelle lui accordent comme un droit absolu. Je ne puis t’en dire davantage, ma chérie; mais n’oublie point ceci, que tu appartiens tout entière à ton mari.

(81)

This is actually a recurrent theme in Maupassant’s fiction, notably in the short story “Enragée?”, published in *Gil Blas* in 1883, only 6 months after *Une Vie*, in which a young woman recounts the surprise of her wedding night in a letter to her best friend. What is interesting about this particular short story is that the shock of the wedding night takes a comical turn, when the young woman tells us that “la peur m’envahissant, je me demandai s’il me voulait tuer. [...] En une seconde, je m’imaginais des choses effroyables. Je pensai aux faits divers des journaux, aux crimes mystérieux, à toutes les histoires chuchotées de jeunes filles épousées par des misérables! Est-ce que je le connaissais, cet homme? Je me débattais, le repoussant, éperdue d’épouvante. Je lui arrachai même une poignée de cheveux et un côté de la moustache, et, délivrée par cet effort, je me levai en hurlant ‘au secours!’ Je courus à la porte [...] et je m’élançai, presque nue, dans l’escalier. [...] Des hommes [...] apparurent [...] Je tombai dans les bras de l’un d’eux en implorant sa protection. [...] Puis on a ri, mais ri comme tu ne peux pas croire. Toute la maison riait, de la cave au grenier” (Maupassant, “Enragée?” 134-5).

“Overcome by fear, I asked myself whether he wanted to kill me. [...] In a second, I started to imagine dreadful things. I thought of the ‘news in brief’ section in the papers, of mysterious crimes, of all the whispered stories of young women married to scoundrels! After all, did I even know this man? I struggled, pushing him away, frantic with fear. I even pulled out a handful of his hair and some of his moustache, and, released by this effort, I got up screaming ‘Help!’ I ran to the door [...] and, almost naked, dashed towards the stairwell. [...] Some men [...] appeared [...] I fell into the arms of one of them, begging for his protection. [...] Then people laughed, laughed harder than you can imagine. The whole house laughed, from the basement to the attic”.

“There are mysteries which are carefully concealed from girls who must remain pure until the time in which we leave them in the arms of the man who will take care of their happiness. It is up to him to unveil the tender secret of life. However, if they have not had any suspicions yet, these girls often rebel when confronted with the slightly brutal reality hidden behind dreams. Hurt in their souls, and even in their bodies, they refuse the husband what the law, human and natural, grants him as an absolute right. I cannot tell you more, my dear, but do not forget this, you belong entirely to your husband”.

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This heartbreaking, embarrassed speech from a father to his daughter is perhaps the most significant aspect of the whole novel. Jeanne’s mother is “unable” to deliver it herself, accentuating the importance not only of a sexual education for women, but of one delivered in a timely fashion, one that will be able to inform them and therefore perhaps even save them from Jeanne’s own fate.

All over Europe, numerous debates arose on the issue of sexual education for young girls. A fascinating and concise source on some of the prevailing opinions at the time is “The Tree of Knowledge”, an article published 1894, in which Thomas Hardy, Walter Besant, Sarah Grand and Eliza Lynn Linton, amongst others, put forth their views on the subject. Besant, to name but one example, stressed his opinion that “a girl certainly ought to know everything that lies before her – the kind of life that will be hers, the probable duties and responsibilities which await her” (Adam et al 676). In “The Women of Today” (1899), German New Woman writer Laura Marholm lamented education’s “concealment of woman from herself” and the “rearing of women to sexlessness” (35). There is a strong recurrence of the representation of the shock of the woman’s move from the sphere of childhood to adulthood, from the safety of the parents’ home to the husband’s realm in both New Woman and French fiction. As de Beauvoir puts it,

[p]endant la période des fiançailles, du flirt, de la cour, si rudimentaire qu’elle ait été, elle a continué à vivre dans son univers habituel de cérémonie et de rêve; le prétendant parlait un langage romanesque ou du moins courtois; il était encore possible de tricher. Et soudain la voilà vue par de vrais yeux, empognée par de vraies mains: c’est

179 In “Enragée?”, the girl tells her friend that “ma pauvre maman que tout effraye, n’a pas osé effleurer ce sujet délicat” (132) – “my poor mother, who is afraid of everything, did not dare to broach this delicate subject”. 
l’implacable réalité de ces regards et de ces étreintes qui l’épouvante.

(II, 157)\textsuperscript{180}

The importance of the wedding night, and of the husband’s delicate role, was often addressed by the practitioners of sexology at the time. Recognising the impact of such a sudden initiation, in France, advice manuals for married couples were available, in which “marriage was envisaged […] not as an alliance of families or even as the proper means of procreation but as an occasion for sexual intimacy” (Cryle 45). Auguste Debay admitted “it is true that man is brutal. Without bothering himself about the mental and physical state of his wife, he insists, he demands that she grant him what he desires” (176). Although, in typical nineteenth-century fashion, he urged women to give in happily to the man’s desires, he also gave advice to the husbands: “Be less despotic in your desires” (176), “induce the awakening of their […] senses by sweetness and tenderness, […] employ stimulations to the soul and body at the same time […] and […] oh! Then you will no longer need to complain of coldness” (177). There is an awareness of the sensitive nature of the wedding night, but also of its potential to introduce the wife to a positive, pleasurable view of sex. Peter Cryle situates the husband at the center of these issues: “it becomes clear […] that [he] has a quite specific sexual duty, \textit{not just to love and honour his new wife but to ensure shared sexual pleasure} in the marriage bed” (48, my italics). The discourse on the man’s role in awakening the woman’s sensuality, however, was not shared in Britain, where the view of marital sexuality tended to acknowledge procreation, rather than enjoyment. The general view was that, as William Acton stated in \textit{The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs} (1857), “a modest

\textsuperscript{180} “During the period of engagement, of flirting, of courting, rudimentary as it was, she continued living in her usual universe of ceremony and daydreaming; her suitor used romantic or at least polite language; it was still possible not to play by the rules. And, all of a sudden, she is gazed upon by real eyes, grasped by real hands: it is the implacable reality of these gazes and embraces which frightens her”. 
woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband’s desires, but principally to gratify him” (178). I do not, of course, wish to imply that such a view was not held in France, but rather to highlight that diverging opinions were more common there, in comparison with Britain.

The idea of sexual pleasure was not easy to address in fiction, however. In the case of the New Woman fiction I discuss here, for example, the need for women writers to maintain a certain decorum had obviously impeded them from exposing such issues. In the case of the French writers, however, the situation is similar: female sexual pleasure is misunderstood by men, difficult to describe, and even more so in the case of, for example, a newlywed young woman. The character in Maupassant’s “Enragée?” , however, presents a comical way of looking at sexual enjoyment. The young woman in the story is convinced that she has been infected with rabies. During her honeymoon, she describes how, during lovemaking with her husband, “tout à coup, une crise subite, extraordinaire, foudroyante, me saisit. Je poussai un cri effroyable, et repoussant mon mari qui s’attachait à moi, je m’élançai dans la chambre […]. C’était la rage, l’horrible rage. J’étais perdue!” (139)\textsuperscript{181}. The morning after, she gives in to her husband again, and has another “crisis”: “j’avais envie de déchirer, de mordre, de hurler; c’était terrible, et cependant moins douloureux que je n’aurais cru” (139-40).\textsuperscript{182} The story ends with her declaring “on s’accoutume à tout, dans la vie…” (140).\textsuperscript{183} This is an exceptional first person account of a newlywed woman’s awakening to pleasure. The story is one of Maupassant’s funniest, and the woman’s auto-derision of her own ignorance and

\textsuperscript{181} “Unexpectedly, a sudden, extraordinary, devastating crisis came over me. I let out a frightening scream, and, pushing my husband, who was holding me, away, I ran all over the room […] It was the rabies, the horrible rabies. I was lost!”

\textsuperscript{182} “I wanted to tear something, to bite, to scream; it was terrible, yet less painful than I would have thought.”

\textsuperscript{183} “One becomes accustomed to everything, in life….”
foolishness renders it remarkably poignant. Once again, the author is trying to understand women’s lives, and, furthermore, from their own point of view.

After considering the undeniable similarities, as well as the significant differences, between these two literatures, I think that one could say that these truly mirror the subject / object distinction which is central to de Beauvoir’s considerations of the relations between man and woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which I will also be considering in more depth later on. While Zola and Maupassant can certainly not be accused of denying their female characters a sexual autonomy and subjectivity, what sets them apart from the New Woman authors is their “male” perspective on the issue. New Woman writers were in fact more preoccupied with the betterment of the sexual condition of woman which could, according to them, only be obtained through a more thorough education of girls in their youth. In *The Heavenly Twins*, “it is made clear that Evadne has to repress her sexual desire for her husband in order to take up a ‘pure’ position, and it is in the articulation of this repressed desire that the pleasure of the text resides” (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siécle* 32), and this point perfectly exemplifies the difference that is at the core of the distinction between the British reflective woman and the French woman of instinct, between the British demand for sexual education, and the French aesthetisation of the very same issues. What this ultimately means is that, once again, though similar in their concerns and belief in the intrinsic sexuality of woman, the prevalence of the mind is what permeates the New Women’s concern with female sexuality, whilst the male authors in France were more prone to develop the more physical and instinctive side of their female characters. Furthermore, while I believe that Zola’s fiction is permeated by his masculinity, Maupassant’s work is more problematic. His recurring concern with female sexual education, and his use of the tragic (*Une Vie*) and
comical ("Enragée?") tones may suggest not only a deep understanding of the need for education, but, more significantly, a concern with finding strategies for raising masculine awareness of the problem.

**Marital Happiness and Satisfaction**

Before we move on to the specific details of female sexuality and its representation within marriage in the fiction of Sarah Grand, Ménie Muriel Dowie, George Egerton, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, it is necessary to make a few preliminary considerations on the institution of marriage and its meaning. A young woman’s situation in the period from 1850 to 1900, which is the focus of this study, could generally be said to be “divided” into two parts – her childhood, which lasted until the moment she got married and left her father’s house, and her adulthood, which began, in every sense, the moment she got married. A young woman’s life was often spent in anticipation of the moment when she would be married, and the doors of a freer, more adult life, would finally be open to her. The images of young women daydreaming of the future, often inspired by romantic novels, gazing out of an open window and impatiently awaiting their future husbands are characteristic of the period. Sarah Grand herself chooses to present this side of a woman’s life in the character of Edith, while Maupassant imbues Jeanne’s youth with images of this kind. While many women believed that marriage would bring freedom, what they often found was that they had simply passed from their father’s to their husband’s hands. The dreams of a new future are then clearly invalidated, as the married woman “rompt avec son passé, elle est annexée à l’univers de son époux; elle lui
donne sa personne: elle lui doit sa virginité et une rigoureuse fidélité” (Beauvoir II, 224).\(^{184}\)

Generally, de Beauvoir argues, “ce n’est […] pas par amour que se décident les mariages. […] Il s’agit de transcender vers l’intérêt collectif l’union économique et sexuelle de l’homme et de la femme, non d’assurer leur bonheur individuel ” (II, 232).\(^{185}\) Not knowing what it is that they are looking for in a man, these women are denied any part in their choice of a husband. De Beauvoir uses a very interesting idea from Hegel in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, where she quotes the philosopher, who maintains that a woman’s relations as a wife and mother are general, not specific, when he writes that “il ne s’agit pas de ce mari-là, mais d’un mari en général, des enfants en général” (II, 233, italics in original).\(^{186}\) Based on this, she argues that “il ne s’agit aucunement pour la femme de fonder dans leur singularité des rapports avec un époux d’élection, mais de justifier dans leur généralité l’exercice de ses fonctions féminines” (II, 233).\(^{187}\) It is in fact in this very distinction between the specific husband, the person they will marry, and the general idea of a husband, that lies the cause of these female characters’ unhappiness in marriage.

Anxious for her life to begin, and to experience love for the first time, Jeanne’s feelings echo de Beauvoir’s idea of finding “un mari en général”: "[m]aintenant elle était libre d’aimer, elle n’avait plus qu’à le rencontrer, lui! Comment serait-il? Elle ne le savait pas au juste et ne se le demandait même pas. Il serait lui, voilà tout”\(^{188}\) (Maupassant, *Une Vie* 39, italics in original). This “sickly sentimentalism” is slyly

\(^{184}\) “Breaks with her past, becoming attached to her husband’s universe; she gives him her person, and owes him her virginity and a rigorous fidelity”.

\(^{185}\) “Marriages are not founded upon love. […] It is more a question of serving the interest of society through the economic and sexual union of man and woman, as opposed to ensuring their happiness as individuals”.

\(^{186}\) “It is not a question of *this husband* but of a *husband* in general”.

\(^{187}\) “It is not at all a question of founding a relationship with a chosen husband, but rather of justifying her feminine functions in their generality”.

\(^{188}\) “Now she was free to love, she only had to meet him! How would he be? She didn’t know exactly, and did not even wonder. *He would be him*, that was all”.

denounced in Sarah Grand’s *Ideala*, published only five years after *Une Vie*, in similar terms to Jeanne’s earnest daydreams: “I feel like the heroine of a three-volume novel […], and I think continually of him. I don’t know in the least who he is, but that makes no difference” (503). In the discourse of sexology, the influence of reading was seen as potentially damaging. Gustave Bouchereau, in his *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine* (1892), listed reading as a powerful cause for nymphomania:

> The woman, as a child or an adult, very easily receives impressions from her environment; she unconsciously receives the motive of her actions from her reading, from pictures, statuary, plays or daily scenes. When the neuropatic condition affects and dominates her, all the impressions appeal to her morbidly impressionable state, and she often becomes the slave of her instincts. (294)

None of the characters in these works could be described as nymphomaniac, yet this error in judgement, these wild expectations, which are, in all instances, shown as anything but the woman’s fault, are to blame for the initial shock and unhappiness of marriage. In *The Heavenly Twins*, the opposition between the man of her dreams, the unknown man she has married, and the man her husband really is, is given even more significance in its symbolic unveiling of the truth to Evadne in an unknown woman’s letter received directly after the marriage ceremony. As de Beauvoir highlights, “l’homme du fait que c’est lui qui ‘prend’ la femme […] a un peu plus de possibilité de choix” (II, 232).^{189} The idea of choice is dependent on the knowledge that women do not have, which is often depicted as coming from experience by the French and from education by the British. Maupassant’s work can be placed at the intersection of these ideas, articulating a discourse on choice and sexual satisfaction.

^{189} “Due to the man ‘taking’ the woman, he has a slightly greater possibility of choosing”.
which encompasses both knowledge and experience. There is a movement from the
general, to the specific, and then a return to the general which characterises the
female characters and their knowledge of man in these novels. The female character
moves from her innocent search for a “lui”, to use Jeanne’s words, only to find that
“cet homme à qui elle est vouée à jamais incarne à ses yeux tout l’Homme; et il se
révèle aussi à elle sous une figure inconnue, qui est d’une terrible importance
puisqu’il sera le compagnon de sa vie entière” (Beauvoir II, 246-7).190

Much of Dowie’s portrayal of Gallia’s eponymous heroine centres around her
musings and appraisals of the men in her life, as well as on their relation to herself,
and what they can or cannot bring to her, in a world in which “women’s lives are
presented as inherently problematic, and unhappiness is the norm” (Pykett 148).
Gallia is given the ability to evaluate the men in her life before she gets married,
contrary to Jeanne, Edith, or Evadne, for example, and finally decides to marry the
man who seems most suited for procreation instead of the man she loves. This is
what sets Gallia, both as a novel and a character, apart from both the French and
British texts that form the corpus of this study: she is the only woman given the
possibility of moulding her own future as a wife and mother. It follows, then, that she
is also the only female character here who “gets” married, to use de Beauvoir’s
terminology, setting herself apart from the passive woman who “est mariée, donnée
en mariage par ses parents”, as opposed to men, who “se marient, prennent femme”
(Beauvoir II, 223).191 The Heavenly Twins, “published after the furore surrounding
the Contagious Diseases Acts, [...] caused a scandal through its broaching of the
subject of venereal disease caught by unsuspecting wives and their offspring from
their promiscuous husbands” (Ledger, Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle 32). This

190 “This man to whom she is vowed incarnates Man as a whole in her eyes; and he is revealed to her
as an unknown figure of tremendous importance, since he will be her lifelong companion”.
191 “is married, given in marriage by her parents”, “get married, take a wife”.
explains Grand’s purpose, and, furthermore, gives some insight into the reason behind the different treatment of the importance of women’s choice in marriage. The invalidation of a woman’s choice of husband, caused by ignorance and rêverie, is an idea which is strongly expressed by both the French and British writers. In “The Modern Man and Maid” (1898), Grand likens the superficiality of the young girl’s choice of husband to that of the purchase of a pet: “she is left to choose a husband as she might choose a parrot, for his powers to please, his talk and his plumage, so to speak” (314). Thus, the husband a young woman had chosen before her knowledge of the real meaning of marriage suddenly takes on a different aspect after the wedding night. In Une Vie, this change is rendered obvious by, for example, the change in register of speech between Jeanne and Julien. Whilst they had been accustomed to address each other using the polite and formal “vous”, the morning after their wedding night, Julien gently informs Jeanne that “entre nous, nous pouvons nous tutoyer maintenant, mais devant tes parents il vaut mieux attendre […]. Ce sera tout naturel en revenant de notre voyage de noces” (87).

The Sexual Subject and the “Other”

De Beauvoir considers that sexual subjectivity is experienced differently by men and women:

L’homme se tend vers sa partenaire, mais il demeure au cœur de cette activité, comme en général le sujet en face des objets qu’il perçoit et des instruments qu’il manipule; il se projette vers l’autre sans perdre

192 “When we are alone, we can be on more familiar terms now, but we should wait a little longer to do so in front of your parents […]. It will seem perfectly natural if we do so after our honeymoon.”
son autonomie; la chair féminine est pour lui une proie et il saisit sur elle les qualités que sa sensualité réclame de tout objet. (II, 146)

Despite a movement towards his partner, the man’s role within the sexual relationship very much remains the central element of it. The erotic encounter arises from the impetus of the man’s desire, and it is around and for him that it is played out. Because of the man’s tendency to consider his own subjective sexual role the prerogative, the woman finds herself relegated to the condition of an object. De Beauvoir argues that “qu’elle s’adapte plus ou moins exactement à son rôle passif, la femme est toujours frustrée en tant qu’individu actif. Ce n’est pas l’organe de la possession qu’elle envoie à l’homme: c’est sa proie” (II, 188-9). It is not the phallus which confers the man his subjectivity, but the woman’s turning into an object as an acknowledgement of his active desire. After experiencing her own subjective sexual awakening, the woman “désire en se faisant objet demeurer un sujet” (Beauvoir II, 181), to reclaim recognition of her active sexual appetite from the man. It is therefore not only the man’s “prey” that she envies: the woman also wishes to be able to see the man consenting to become the object of her own desire. The will to confer a conscious, subjective sexuality to their female characters, albeit in different ways, is what brings together the literature of both countries and positions these fictions as strong expressions of female sexual subjectivity.

Zola’s heroines are sexually voracious subjects. Renée is characterised by her sensual disposition: her insatiable sexual appetite and her tyrannical power are rendered visible through her brutal attitude and sexually dominant position (Baguley,

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193 “Man reaches out towards his partner, but remains at the centre of this activity, similarly to his general condition as subject facing the objects he perceives and instruments he manipulates; he projects himself towards the other without losing his autonomy; he considers feminine flesh as a prey, and seizes in her the qualities his sensuality demands from each and every object”.

194 “Whether she adapts more or less exactly to her passive role, woman is always frustrated as an active individual. It is not the possessive organ she envies the man, but his prey”.

195 “Wishes to remain a subject while she is making herself an object”. 
La Curée de Zola, ou “la Vie à Outrance” 47). Thérèse is also a dominant character, repeatedly shown to sexually overpower Laurent in the bedroom. “Si j’étais un homme…” (Zola, La Curée 173),\(^{196}\) says Renée while she and Maxime discuss which of the women of Paris they would sleep with, successfully casting her role “as a man”, and bestowing the power of choice upon herself. In his work on La Curée, David Baguley states that her character truly epitomises “l’inversion des rôles masculin et féminin” (69). Characters such as Thérèse or Renée differ from Jeanne, for example, precisely in the way in which they allow themselves to choose and to adopt the position of the subject in the sexual relationship. These extreme expressions of the female character as sexual subject not only support the idea that, “réceptif, le désir féminin est en un sens actif” (Beauvoir II, 155),\(^{197}\) but also reverse one of the core issues of the period: that of female sexual choice.

Jeanne’s husband Julien has several lovers throughout the novel, but she only manages to feel desire for him, and once it is thwarted by her loss of faith in him, she can only “re-direct” it towards a desire, or even a need, to become a mother again. This is crucial to the understanding of her experience of sexuality, as, despite being granted the sexual autonomy in her awakening which was mentioned earlier, Jeanne is a character who is at times uncomfortable with herself as a sexual subject. In her seminal article “Une Vie / Des Vides ou le Nom de la Mère”, Naomi Schor argues that “la grande erreur de Jeanne sera de croire que l'on peut ou doit faire coïncider en un seul homme les fonctions de mari, d'amant et de père, idéal romantique et bourgeois qui ne correspond en rien aux réalités de la vie, d'une vie

\(^{196}\) “If I were a man…”

\(^{197}\) “Receptive, female desire is, in a sense, active”.

féminine” (60). I believe, however, that the significance of Jeanne’s sentimental, sexual, and marital, disillusionment does not lie in the failure of her relationship with Julien, or in her recognition of it and the despair it causes, but in her usage of that very failure to realise the importance of motherhood. She passively accepts her husband’s lack of sexual interest in her after their honeymoon, despite her desire for him, but it is in her attempt to use him to become pregnant again that she ultimately regains her status as a subject in the relationship, and that the “mistake” deplored by Schor is redeemed. De Beauvoir considers that for woman to be able to accept her transformation into a carnal object with her need for subjectivity, she must be able to make the man her prey, as he makes her his (II, 155). This is precisely what Maupassant allows Jeanne to do in *Une Vie*. Granting the disdainful Julien his wish to feel powerful through her desire for him, she is in reality taking full control of the sexual relationship through her manipulation of his ability to give her a child. Despite the novel being an account of a failed life, and of the failed marriage at the heart of it, what is interesting about the relationship between Jeanne and Julien is the progress the main character has made from the shock and disgust of her wedding night, to her ability to see the sexual act as something she can use to make herself happy. Instead of seeking satisfaction within her relationship with her husband, she imagines that “ses enfants grandiraient, l’aîmeraient; elle vieillirait tranquille, contente, sans s’occuper de son mari” (Maupassant 199). Not unlike Gallia who “shifts her evaluation of men from the romantic to the reproductive” (G. Cunningham 99), Jeanne succeeds in remaining a subject whilst being made into an object, as in de Beauvoir’s idea expressed earlier. Gallia, as seen in Chapter I, is inspired to

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198 “Jeanne’s greatest mistake is to believe that the functions of husband, lover, and father, can, or should, be made to coincide within the same man, a romantic and bourgeois ideal which does not correspond in any measure to the realities of life, of a woman’s life”.
199 “Her children would grow up, would love her; she would calmly, happily grow old, without worrying about her husband”.
choose between love and motherhood, and therefore between a satisfying sexual life and life with a suitable partner to forward the race with. Similarly, a woman observing Evadne in *The Heavenly Twins* makes the following reflection:

As she grew older, she feared her mouth would harden in expression if she were not happy – and the old lady inwardly prayed Heaven that she might be saved from that; prayed that little arms might come to clasp her neck, and warm little lips shower kisses upon her lips to keep them soft and smiling, lest they settled into stony coldness, and forgot the trick. (333)

In many of these works, happiness is seen as a result of the rewarding experience of motherhood, and, more significantly, as an alternative to marital satisfaction. This realisation is summed up in Gallia’s words, “there is something more than love in the world […]. There is motherhood” (128, my italics). While it is easy to see Grand as purporting the idea of sexual intercourse as a means to motherhood (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* 32), or, indeed, as perpetuating the view of women’s sexuality solely as reproductive, her usage of the motif of sexual awakening sheds light on a more complex view of women. What emerges is, in a way that resembles the other writers considered here, a strong image of the female sexual subject, in complete control of the role of her sex both in the erotic and reproductive spheres, providing, as in Gail Cunningham’s description of Dowie’s novel, “a narrative context in which the (radical) woman becomes secure and masculinity appears as ‘other’” (105). Although de Beauvoir herself would not have seen it in this way, the Beauvoirian idea of Self as defined through otherness thus finds expression in what can be termed a celebration of what defines the female
sexual experience as “Other” – the interdependent spheres of the erotic and the reproductive.200

In “L’Inutile Beauté” (1890), one of his later stories, Maupassant returns to the themes of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood, situating sexuality and reproduction in connection with the idea of beauty. The story is about a husband and wife, and begins with an argument on their way to a ball. The wife unflinchingly condemns her husband’s way of continuously making her pregnant, an act which she understands as an attack on her beauty and independence. She describes what would happen after each time she had given birth:

Quand je reparaissais, fraîche et belle, indestructible, toujours séduisante et toujours entourée d’hommages, espérant enfin que j’allais vivre un peu comme une jeune femme riche qui appartient au monde, la jalousie vous reprenait, et vous recommenciez à me poursuivre de l’infâme et haineux désir dont vous souffrez en ce moment, à mon côté. Et ce n’est pas le désir de me posséder - je ne

200 When considering this image of women as erotico-reproductive creatures, it also important to note that there is some evidence to suggest that motherhood was increasingly becoming, especially in the middle classes, a matter of choice rather than an accident or a duty. What was, then, the role of contraception, and how common a practice was it? Janet Farrell argues that “products for reproductive control were widely available […] but some methods – condoms, for example – never reached wide respectability. […] [N]one of these devices was strictly a new invention […] condoms [having] been associated with prostitution for centuries, and with family limitation since the early nineteenth century” (205). In Sexology Uncensored, Lesley Hall points to the fact that, “from 1870 the British birth-rate, and that of most European nations, perceptibly decline, due to a variety of factors, of which the […] employment of contraception was one” (Hall 137). In France, the “population debate” was deeply inscribed within the discourse on the woman question, from as early as the 1850s, with supporters of women’s rights giving great significance to population control (Offen 652). In Britain, “Malthusian propagandists had been advocating ‘prudential restriction’ of births within marriage on economic grounds since the middle of the nineteenth century, [but the] vast majority of eugenic thinkers […] deplored birth-control for creating a dangerous differential between the birth-date of the middle classes and that of the less desirable elements within society” (Hall 137). Elinor Accampo’s article on contraception in France shows that birth-rates were dropping throughout Europe: “for every 1000 married women between the ages of fifteen and fifty, Britain produced 248 births […] and French women provided a paltry rate of 173” (242). Louis François Etienne Bergeret’s The Preventive Obstacle, or Conjugal Onanism (1878), as its title suggests, came down hard on contraception, which is referred variously as “conjugal frauds”, or “fraudulent connections” (Hellerstein 193,4), for example. Yet, some took a more positive approach, such as the American physician Charles Knowlton, who discussed the advantages and disadvantages of several methods of contraception in Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People (1832).
me serais jamais refusée à vous - c’est le désir de me déformer.

(116)\textsuperscript{201}

The story is original in its structure, as it is divided into three parts. The first recounts the argument, after which the Comtesse tells her husband, in a bid to avenge his attack on her body, that one of their children is not his. After this, the story is, in a way, interrupted, and we see the couple through the eyes of two men gossiping about them at the theatre. This part of the story almost takes the form of a monologue during which one of the men exposes his views on maternity and the “modern woman.” The third and final part sees the reconciliation of the couple, and the wife’s admission of her lie. The Comtesse is a devoted mother to her children, yet she is also a beautiful young woman and wishes to be able to enjoy herself. She does not wish to be confined to an “existence de jument poulinière”, and to the “travaux forcés de l’engendrement” (108)\textsuperscript{202} to which she feels she has been subjected. The story thus becomes another impressive example of Maupassant’s invested depictions of women. Through her words and those of the male observer at the theatre, a complex image of woman is constructed. Rather than refuse the female ability of giving birth, this image places it within a larger context that sees woman as a complex being, and seeks to remove women from the sole role of mothers. By placing words with a heavy connotation of animalism in her mouth, Maupassant highlights the difference between a mare and a woman giving birth. As the story’s heroine herself says, “Je suis, nous sommes, des femmes du monde civilisé, monsieur. Nous ne sommes plus et nous refusons d’être de simples femelles

\textsuperscript{201} “When I reappeared, fresh and beautiful, indestructible, always seductive and surrounded by compliments, hoping that I would finally live like a young, rich woman of the world, you would be, again, assailed by jealousy and would begin to pursue me with the despicable, hateful desire that you feel, at this moment, next to me. And it isn’t the desire to possess me – I would never have refused you – it is the desire to deform me”.

\textsuperscript{202} “Existence of a broodmare shut away in a stud farm”, “the forced labour of breeding”.
The “je suis, nous sommes” cements the character’s standing, not as a selfish, vain woman of the world, but as a young woman with valid concerns and aspirations. In my own view of Maupassant as an author with a deep understanding of women, the way he allows the character to almost correct herself and to use the plural “nous” seems almost an admission of a feminist agenda on his part. Furthermore, it is impossible to adequately convey the strength of this statement, as, in French, “femelle” means “female”, yet is only used in relation to animals. Thus, what she is saying here, and what the story says, is that women are more than just mothers. While motherhood is indeed wonderful, there are also other things in life. The end of the story shows a husband who has reached a new understanding of women: “Il sentit par une sorte d’intuition que cet être-là n’était plus seulement une femme destinée à perpétuer sa race, mais le produit bizarre et mystérieux de tous nos désirs compliqués, amassés en nous par les siècles” (483).

**Female Sexual Subjectivity and Adultery**

The ideas I have discussed so far situate the issues of female sexuality strictly within marriage, yet it would not be possible for this study to be complete, especially when considering some of Zola’s novels, without an examination of adultery. While the New Woman texts under scrutiny do not give great importance to the idea of the female adulterer – more will be said on this later – the French texts shed light on the

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203 “I am, we are, women of the civilised world, sir. We are no longer, and we refuse to be, simple females repopulating the earth”.

204 “He felt this being was not only a woman destined to perpetuate the race, but a strange and mysterious product of all our complicated desires, accumulated during centuries”.

significance of the issue. One of the central ideas proposed by the fin-de-siècle rational New Woman was that “men should emulate the moral superiority of women, rather than that the New Woman should have the moral freedoms allowed to men” (Ledger, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* 32). This explains the more subdued representations of adultery in the fiction of Sarah Grand, for example. In “Virgin Soil”, Egerton presents the unnamed protagonist’s view of her husband’s adultery as her “only solace” (108), and as a salvation from her “marital duties.” Whilst *The Heavenly Twins* does not centre any of its several plotlines exclusively on adultery, the reader is given a few glimpses of it throughout the novel. In Malta, Evadne suspects a man of having an affair with a woman who is not his wife, for example (191), and Mosley openly flirts with another woman in front of Edith. While these can seem but minor plotlines at first, the fact that Grand, for example, chooses to insist on the idea that Mosley’s flirting is reciprocated by the unnaturally corseted woman shows that Grand is not only exposing man’s dissolute sexual behaviour, but also making a point about the existence of a parallel conduct in woman.205

Adultery’s destabilisation of the family nucleus (Bertrand-Jennings 12) gives rise to a plethora of interpretations of female adultery. In Zola’s case, and as I have already discussed in Chapter Two, this is often a central element of the discourse of female sexuality as evil, of the sexual woman as perceived by the anxious male writer and / or character. In these cases, the adulteress is almost seen as a changing, deceitful witch, in the know that “il est plus prudent de dissimuler à son maître ses métamorphoses” (Beauvoir I, 308).206 Whilst the body of critical work on Zola’s evil sexual femininities is invaluable, I believe that it is necessary to move away from the all too frequent equation of female sexuality as sinful or malicious to

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205 For more on the corseted state, see Chapter One, note 76, and the discussion of Maupassant’s “La Mère aux Monstres” in Chapter Four.
206 “It is wiser to hide her metamorphoses from her master”. 
really understand what the naturalist author contributed to the depiction of the condition féminine of his time. Many critics, such as Rachel Mesch, have insisted on the importance of the representation of female sexuality as social degeneration. Let us now consider these strong representations of an almost forceful female sexuality and desire, not as the seed of degeneration, but as a vehicle for social critique. Due to either lack of sexual knowledge – Jeanne, the character in “Virgin Soil”, Edith, etc. – or the force of circumstance – Renée, for example had been raped and needed to be married to avoid shame falling on her family, Thérèse is “given” to Camille by her aunt, and has no way of rebelling against this – the female characters in the French novels find themselves either committing or otherwise involved in a plotline about adultery.

De Beauvoir devotes some time to examine the circumstances and causes which may lead a woman to deceive her husband in the section on social life of Le Deuxième Sexe. There are two main points which I would like to consider in relation to what is found in the fiction of Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. Firstly, and as has been seen earlier, the situation of a woman in the nineteenth century was such that the husband was handicapped by the fact that, in de Beauvoir’s terms, he was usually submitted to, not chosen (Beauvoir II, 414). It follows that “c’est par rancune qu’elle se décide à tromper son mari” (Beauvoir II, 415): this is really the central idea which forms the basis of the terrible adultery in Thérèse Raquin. Resentful after being given in marriage to Camille, Thérèse’s sexual encounters with Laurent are not so much a revenge on the husband she despises, as a rebellion against her aunt – who is also his mother – who becomes the embodiment of the institution of arranged marriages. While most critical attention has been devoted to the motif of Camille as

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207 “She decides to cheat on her husband out of spite”.
the corpse separating the lovers, closer examination reveals the centrality of the aunt-mother to the theme of adultery. Zola writes that “elle [...] voulait la donner à son fils comme un ange gardien” (28, my italics). The image of Thérèse as Camille’s unwilling guardian angel reminds one of the Victorian ideal of the “Angel in the house,” the ultimate embodiment of the pure, moral, and, most of all, asexual wife and mother. This woman – the Angel in the house, but also Camille’s own “guardian angel” in Zola’s novel – is expected to be pure and resents not knowing the joys of a full sexual life. Thérèse not only murders her husband, but causes paralysis in her mother-in-law, destroying both her husband and the very institution of marriage, and therefore invalidating the image of herself as guardian angel. While Zola has been accused of giving “little consideration to the formidable extension of the erotic beyond the narrowly biological frontiers” (Hemmings 148), his treatment of adultery allows him to explore alternative options for the women in his novels. He succeeds in breaking the boundaries of marriage and the rigid structures of society for his female characters, thus enabling himself to explore their sexuality more freely. Maupassant’s treatment of adultery in Une Vie is of a more conventional nature, and aligns itself more closely to that of Sarah Grand in The Heavenly Twins. Here, after Jeanne discovers the passionate, explicit letters of her dead mother’s lover, she asks herself:

Si petite mère n’était pas morte, […] si elle allait soudain se lever, parler? La connaissance de l’affreux secret n’amoirindrirait-elle pas son amour filial? L’embrasserait-elle des mêmes lèvres pieuses? La chérirait-elle de la même affection sacrée? Non. Ce n’était pas possible! et cette pensée lui déchira le cœur. (190)²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ “if little mother was not dead, […] if she were to suddenly get up, to speak? Wouldn’t the knowledge of the awful secret weaken her filial love? Would she kiss her with the same pious lips? Would she cherish her with the same sacred affection? No. It was not possible! and this thought tore her heart!”
Throughout the novel, Maupassant’s omniscient narrator aligns him/herself with Jeanne’s character, and, despite the masculinity of the writer, it is in passages such as the one above that the French writer’s depiction of his contemporary *condition féminine* comes through in the clearest manner. In an article on the fiction of Oscar Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Sacher-Masoch, Rita Felski admits that “one can debate the assumption that [these authors’] appropriation of [...] metaphors of femininity was aligned with the feminist project” (Felski 1094). Whilst it is clear that the goals of such writers as Zola and Maupassant were not those of the British New Women, there is a certain mirroring and parallelism of concerns that resonates in both fictions, and the feminine point of view that emerges from Jeanne’s heartbreak upon discovering her mother’s adultery only serves to emphasise this further. I would now like to consider marriage from a different standpoint, by comparing and contrasting it with prostitution.

**Prostitution and Marriage**

De Beauvoir observes that “[l]e mariage [...] a comme corrélatif immédiat la prostitution” (II, 424). In 1888, two years after the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Mona Caird wrote in her essay on “Marriage” that “we are [...] led to conclude that ‘modern Respectability’ draws its life-blood from the degradation of womanhood in marriage and in prostitution” (79). The parallels between the institution of marriage and the figure of the prostitute are numerous in the literature of the time. The Contagious Diseases Acts had allowed policemen to arrest women suspected of prostitution and force them to be medically examined for venereal

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209 “Marriage [...] has prostitution as its immediate corollary”.
diseases. What is of note here is that a “woman suspected of prostitution” was in fact any woman seen unaccompanied by her husband or a chaperone on the street. The vivid image of a woman being arrested solely on the grounds of walking the streets alone can be applied to the contemporary understanding of female sexuality. Either a woman was married, or she was considered or, more importantly, assumed to be a prostitute. Leaving the home, the domestic sphere, by herself, the woman was entering the man’s sphere, the public world, but also, the sexual domain in which she was not permitted to venture alone.\textsuperscript{210} In both France and Britain, the need to control female desire and sexuality was often accompanied by a tendency to encase it within either the “respectable” institution of marriage, or the “shameful” profession of the prostitute. In \textit{The Beth Book}, Sarah Grand’s eponymous heroine is told by her mother that “when a girl lets a man kiss her, she \textit{has} to marry him” (Grand, \textit{The Beth Book 364}).\textsuperscript{211} the very hint of a sensual awakening must immediately be made respectable by compartmentalising it within a recognisable and socially accepted framework. It follows that the wife’s sexuality and desire are only given a very reduced “space” – marriage, the home – within that institution, whilst the woman who ventures outside it – a freer relationship, into the “street,” both literally and metaphorically – must necessarily be a prostitute. It is inevitable to notice the parallels between the life of a prostitute and that of a wife in her “duties” to the men, for the first, and the one man, for the latter, in her life:

\[ \text{[d]u point de vue économique, [la] situation [de la prostituée] est symétrique de celle de la femme mariée. […] Pour toutes deux l’acte} \]

\textsuperscript{210} A woman’s sexuality was often seen as dependent on men: independent sexual awakening, for example, was more often than not, disregarded. The will to represent a sexually independent and “cognisant” woman is precisely, as I have noted, what makes the texts considered throughout my study interesting.

\textsuperscript{211} This image echoes Madame Adam, who, in \textit{“The Tree of Knowledge”} (1894), wrote “I married when I was quite young a man whom I detested because I had been led to believe that a kiss on a young girl’s mouth constituted a betrayal!” (Adam et al, 675).
sexuel est un service; la seconde est engagée à vie par un seul homme; la première a plusieurs clients qui la payent à la pièce.

(Beauvoir II, 425)²¹²

As de Beauvoir notes, the sexual act constitutes the livelihood of both the prostitute and the wife. What differentiates one from the other is the number of clients, and the frequency, or form, the “payments” take. The heroine of The Beth Book’s realisation of this fact is made clear when she remarks “one would think he had bought me” (375), after one of the many arguments with her husband. In this novel, the increasing lack of respect and affection shown by Daniel to Beth after they are married can be seen as indicating his own impression of her as an acquisition which needs no further attention. In Zola’s Pot Bouille (1884), reflecting on her “hunt” for a husband, Berthe, a recently married young woman, laments this humiliating activity, calling it “cette offre de son corps, sur les trottoirs autorisés des salons bourgeois” (385, my italics).²¹³ Her search for a husband was heavily influenced by her mother’s wishes, and she refers to it as “ce que les mères enseignent aux filles sans fortune, tout un cours de prostitution décente et permise” (385).²¹⁴

²¹² From an economic point of view, [the prostitute’s] situation is symmetrical to the married woman’s. [...] For both, the sexual act is a service; the latter is engaged for life by one man; the former has several clients who pay her per item”.

²¹³ “That offering up of her body on the authorised sidewalks of bourgeois living rooms”.

²¹⁴ “What is taught by mothers to their daughters, a complete course in decent, allowed prostitution”.
feelings about his infidelity, but also her own thoughts about the very institution of marriage. As her husband expresses his wish to rekindle their relationship, she declares that “Je suis votre femme, c'est vrai, mais votre femme – libre. J’allais prendre un engagement d’un autre côté, vous me demandez la préférence. Je vous la donnerai... à prix égal” (160).215 The Count’s wife’s wish is that she should be paid as much as the “cocottes”216 he has been with: “donnez-moi tout de suite cinq-mille francs et je suis à vous pour un mois” (160-1).217 The character of the wife comes across as very forward and defiant, and the story has a comical undertone, like much of Maupassant’s short fiction. While it would be all too easy to dismiss this story as a misogynistic depiction of the wife, I believe that it is actually an extremely powerful depiction of a married woman precisely because of its parallelism with the figure of the prostitute. As Pal-Lapinsky argues, “in the nineteenth century [...] the most elusive, threatening, and fascinating public female body to consistently resist domestication was that of the courtesan” (153, my italics). Maupassant’s depiction of the woman’s own wish to be paid and treated as a prostitute, or a kept mistress, reverses the demeaning connotations of the exchange of sex for economical and material well-being, allowing for an empowered, and empowering, realisation of her status. By aligning her position as wife with that of the prostitute, she is bringing the public sphere into the private realm of the home, but, more importantly, breaking the shackles of the expected, confined, sexuality of the wife in order to experience the freer one of the prostitute. As Lynda Nead notes, it is the combination of cash with the public sphere that allows the prostitute to be powerful and independent (Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain 349). It could be argued

215 “I am your wife, that much is true, but your... free wife. I had the intention of finding a commitment elsewhere, and you are asking me to give you the priority. I shall give it to you... at the same price”.
216 “Cocotte” was a popular term in mid- to late- nineteenth-century France, used to designate a prostitute or a kept woman.
217 “Give me five thousand francs right now, and I shall be yours for a month”.

that her lack of love and desire for her husband invalidate all these claims, due to the 

sheer disgust her nightly “duties” will bring. It seems to me, however, that the 

significance of the story lies not in this, but in the wife’s almost revolutionary initiative 

to transcend from the muted, hypocritical symmetry between wife and prostitute to 

her open reclaiming of it. Moreover, the small detail of the wife’s anonymity within the 

story adds to the importance of her initiative: whilst all the characters in the text are 

named, the wife is only designated by the pronoun “elle”.

As she states her price, the nameless wife in “Au Bord du Lit” tells her 

husband that their new arrangement will bring a new, exciting dimension to their sex 

life: “Vous donnez à notre amour… légitime, un prix nouveau, une saveur de 

débauche, un ragoût de… polissonnerie en le… tarifant comme un amour coté” 

(163). Far from fleeing or ignoring the reality of prostitution, this character sees it 

as a sensually refreshing game to be played between herself and her husband. Two 

years after the publication of “Au Bord du Lit”, Maupassant revisits the theme of 

prostitution as sexual fantasy in marriage in “Imprudence”. In it, a newlywed young 

woman asks her husband to take her to dinner in a private room of a cabaret, where 

he used to take women before they got married. In a bid to reawaken their sexual 

desire for each other, she tells him that “je voudrais être prise pour ta maîtresse […] 

dans cet endroit-là, où tu dois avoir des souvenirs… […] où on s’aime tous les soirs” 

(267-8). In Le Temps, le Désir et l’Horreur, Alain Corbin discusses the influence 

of the prostitute on the wife’s sexuality at the turn of the century:

Un basculement s’opère […], quand se brouillent peu à peu les 

modèles de la courtisane et de l’épouse honnête. ‘L’alcôve se fait

218 “You will be giving our... legitimate love a new price, a taste of debauchery, a flavour of... 

naughtiness by treating it as a priced affair”.

219 “I would like to be mistaken for your mistress [...] in that place, where you must have some 

memories... [...] where people make love every night”. 
Maupassant’s stories succeed in the way that they present the prostitute, not as a source of degeneration, but as a model of sexual emancipation for his heroines. Following the prostitute’s example, his characters learn about the alternative possibilities that are available to them. Unconstrained by their role as wives, these characters are able to expand their sexual horizons further through their imitation of the prostitute.

In Grand’s *The Beth Book*, the character of Daniel Maclure, Beth’s husband, is exemplary of the attempt to institutionalise and compartmentalise female desire. Working as a doctor in a Lock Hospital, this man is actively involved in the examination and quarantining of prostitutes infected with syphilis. What is interesting here is not so much his involvement in the, one could almost say secondary, plot of the Contagious Diseases Acts in which so many New Women were involved, but his role as husband-lover-doctor in relation to his wife and his mistress. At the beginning of their courtship “he showed his devotion by being greatly concerned about [Beth’s] health” (Grand, *The Beth Book* 6975), whilst, as soon as they are married and their relationship begins to decline, he stops paying attention to her health, considering that naming her ailment is enough. This contrasts with his attitude towards his mistress, Bertha, who is also a patient of his, and whom he moves into his own house. Dr. Maclure embodies the contemporary need to define

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220 “A change took place [...], slowly blurring the differences between the courtesan and the respectable wife. ‘The alcove became a house of ill repute.’ [...]. Moralists emphasised both the role of the prostitute as a model of hedonistic practices [...] and her failure to contain the respectable woman within the boundaries of decency”.

221 More on this in Chapter Three.
and seclude the sexually independent woman. Once he has married Beth and believes he has succeeded in controlling her as a sexual being, he no longer feels the need to tend to her health, to examine and name the various manifestations of her body, whereas he pays the greatest attention to his new “patient” Bertha, who is his mistress and therefore cannot be neatly fitted into the harmless category of the wife. Bertha’s own “double role” as the patient-mistress likens her to the many women he cures at the Hospital. In his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Foucault identifies the Victorian tendency to create spaces in which to seclude and contain dangerous, non-normative forms of sexuality (this would include, for example, prostitution, but also female sexual desire, which was often labelled as hysteria):

*S’il faut vraiment faire place aux sexualités illégitimes, qu’elles aillent faire leur tapage ailleurs [...]. La maison close et la maison de santé seront ces lieux de tolerance [...]. Là seulement le sexe sauvage aurait droit à des forms de réel, mais bien insularisées, et à des types de discours clandestins, circonscrits, codés. Partout ailleurs le puritanisme moderne aurait imposé son triple décret d’interdiction, d’inexistence, et de mutisme. (Foucault 11)*

Foucault’s “triple edict” does not exist within the walls of Beth and Daniel’s home – his constant “coarse” allusions and stories about the many prostitutes he works with make it a space where sexuality, in all its forms, is not only mentioned, but vividly present for Beth, making marriage, not the pure sexless sphere of the “Angel in the

\[222\] Moreover, there is a strong insistence throughout the novel on Daniel’s economic domination of the household: he does not allow Beth to have any money of her own, even when she has earned it herself, yet, despite his heavy debts, manages to make expensive gifts to Bertha, seemingly paying her for her affection or attention.

\[223\] “If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, [...] let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere [...] The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance [...]. Only in those places would untrammeled sex have the right to (safely insularised) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse. Everywhere else, modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence” (Foucault, Trans. Hurley, 4)
house” but a “long initiation into the ways of the vicious” (Grand, *The Beth Book* 413). By making his lovers – and by this we can include Beth before marriage, and Bertha as his mistress – into his patients, and transferring his role as a Lock Hospital doctor into his private life, he successfully quarantines both Beth and Bertha in the Lock Hospital that the home is transformed into, reinforcing the idea of a subtler distinction between the prostitute and the wife. Moreover, Daniel’s making of his mistress Bertha into his patient mirrors the contemporary “sexual overtones of the examination procedures for female venereal patients” (Walkowitz 57). His ceasing to care for his wife’s health after marrying her, on the other hand, illustrates the desire to control female sexuality through marriage. It follows that if the wife’s erotic life is successfully suppressed – and *repressed* – her threatening, desiring, subjective sexual self is safely kept under the husband-doctor’s medico-moral guardianship. In *Nana*, the heroine’s relationship with the marquess of Chouard, for example, is constructed along similar lines: while living under the roof of “his” house – the house he has provided for her to live in – he expects her to renounce all other men. Female agency and free choice sets the liberating imitation of prostitutes by the wives in Maupassant’s fiction from Beth and Bertha in Grand’s novel.

If prostitutes and wives are equivalent, can the same be said of clients and husbands? I have established that in the French fiction, the wife and the prostitute often mirror each other. In Grand’s fiction, the prostitute is set against the wife. In *Ideala*, for example, the novel’s heroine sees her husband with another woman, but all we are told is that she was dressed in red. Later on, a friend of Ideala’s clarifies that her husband was indeed with a prostitute. Ideala’s husband is mentioned, but never seen in the novel, almost invalidating him as a husband-figure. By highlighting Ideala’s naivety, Grand is opposing the wife and the prostitute, and, by extension,
also the husband and the client. Furthermore, Grand’s fiction shows that it is the wife herself who differentiates, in the very same man, her husband from the prostitute’s client. The disgust and intolerance that Beth and Ideala feel towards their husbands’ participation in the seedy underworld of prostitution, and Grand’s own position regarding morality and social purity, show that, at least ideally, the husband should not be a client. Conversely, in the French works, the husband’s resemblance with the client is very strong, and, contrary to what happens in the New Woman novel, the resemblance is sometimes made apparent and/or instigated by the wife herself. In “Au Bord du Lit” for example, the husband is scandalised by his wife behaviour, referring to her “vilains mots” and “drôle d’idée” (162)\(^{224}\), and described as “perplexe, mécontent” (163)\(^{225}\) at the end. In *Nana*, Zola’s depiction of class, which I will discuss further on, serves to further identify the husband with the client.

What emerges from this analysis of the image of the prostitute and the wife is a strong parallelism between the two. This, in turn, seems to reinforce the ideology behind the French hygienist movement and the Contagious Diseases Acts and their vilifying of woman as the source of and vehicle for venereal disease and, consequently, also immorality.

**Conclusion**

The similarities in concern, and perhaps even in scope, that New Women shared with their contemporary French male writers shed light on an awareness, not only of the female erotic potential, but, more importantly, of its intrisicality to woman. What Angelique Richardson calls “the blueprint of Grand’s fiction: the sorry story of a

\(^{224}\) “Awful words”, “bizarre idea”.
\(^{225}\) “Perplexed, unhappy”.
‘highly bred’ woman who married a ‘man of loose morals’’ (Love and Eugenics 4) thus becomes a powerful vehicle for a freer depiction of female eroticism and desire, which, as we have seen, mirrors, not in its form, but in the very core of its concerns, such unlikely predecessors as Zola and Maupassant. Perhaps, though, it would be more appropriate not to call them “predecessors”, but to simply state the parallelisms in these writers’ concerns. Historically, it would in fact be inaccurate to portray New Woman fiction as in some way resulting from the French naturalist or realist schools, not only because of writers such as Sarah Grand’s open criticism of such writers, but, more importantly, because of the passive quality such a statement would confer on these feminist thinkers.

Much of the male-authored French fiction of the latter half of the nineteenth century has been described as furthering "the empowerment of the male voice through the study of women's bodies" (Mesch 37). I think that the analyses of the novels in this chapter prove that there are many more similarities between the New Women writers of the British fin de siècle and authors of what Sarah Grand called the “literary sewer which streams from France” (The Heavenly Twins 186) than have been acknowledged. The idea that marriage does not adequately suit the needs of a woman’s developing sexuality (Beauvoir II, 242) is common to British and French literature. The significance of the shared features surrounding these issues within these two literatures ultimately demonstrates that two currents which have commonly been regarded as opposing were in reality anticipating and mirroring each other in many aspects of their representation of female sexuality.
Chapter Three | The Desire to Control Female Sexual Autonomy: Representing Prostitution in France and Britain 1848 - 1897

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Fig. 8. Edgar Degas. *Le Client Sérieux*. 1879. Monotype on wove paper.

The title of Edgar Degas’s *Le Client Sérieux* (1879) is fascinating: *The Serious Client*. At a time when the debates on prostitution, as we shall see, were raging, the title chosen by Degas is telling: this man is serious, he is respectable, and there is nothing shameful about what he is doing. One of the many French late nineteenth-century works of art depicting prostitutes, I chose to begin this chapter with this one in particular because of its dichotomous depiction of the client and the prostitutes. He stands erect, a cane in his hand, a proud representative of the power of the phallus. Everything about his “side” of the picture is straight, ordered, hidden. He is business-like, stern. Opposite him, however, the women are, it would seem, all that he is not: voluptuous, giggly, undulating, fleshy, round. They lazily inspect their prey. Their limbs are almost intertwined, and their breasts and behinds exposed for consumption. One of them is even holding his hand, beckoning him to join “the other side”. Informed by the double standard, the picture presents a view of these prostitutes as the epitome of sexuality, and seems to suggest that, despite the client’s seriousness, they will seduce him.

One of the main differences between the French and British authors I consider throughout the thesis is that the French choose to represent female sexuality in a
more aestheticised manner, while the New Women maintain a more didactic tone in their works. In the case of the representations of prostitution, however, the New Woman’s concern with the Contagious Diseases Acts and Zola’s naturalist credo come together in their intertwining of scientific/medical discourse and/or methods with moral concerns.

Fig. 9. Timeline of major events mentioned in this chapter.

Émile Zola, principal exponent of the naturalist school, published the novel Nana, ninth volume of the Rougon-Macquart series, in 1880. Despite probably being
the period’s most famous literary rendition of a courtesan, Zola’s novel was preceded by two works which also dealt with main characters deeply embedded in the world of prostitution, Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *Marthe: Histoire d’Une Fille* (1876) and Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Fille Elisa* (1877). The figure of the prostitute is not present “as such” in Sarah Grand’s *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897), but figures heavily as one of the author’s main preoccupations, especially in the latter. The prostitute was “ubiquitous in the novels […] of this period not only because of her prominence as a social phenomenon but, more importantly, because of her function in stimulating artistic strategies to control and dispel her fantasmatic threat to male mastery” (Bernheimer 2), acting as a “metaphor for disorder and the overturning of the natural hierarchies and institutions of society” (Ledger, *The New Woman* 153).

My aim in this chapter is to discuss the various ways in which prostitution and the literary figure of the prostitute are represented in French Naturalist and Realist fiction, and in the New Woman novels of the British fin de siècle. Taking sections from de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe*, I will discuss not only the relevance of the prostitute to the representation of female sexuality, but also demonstrate how it is precisely within this figure that the concerns addressed throughout this study are put forth in the strongest manner. I hope to demonstrate the way in which the literary prostitute’s most significant attribute is her status as a female sexual hyperbole.

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226 In the decades after its 1880 release, an epidemic of ‘Nana figures,’ sexually and economically independent women who, like Nana, straddled the line between stage performance and prostitution, appeared in fiction from North America to East Asia” (Hill 75). Christopher L. Hill’s “Nana in the World: Novel, Gender, and Transnational Form” traces the influence of “the Nana figure” from the United States to Japan. In the article, Hill not only discusses the impact of Zola’s novel, but also its place in relation to the “theories of social behaviour and techniques for representing [prostitution] that were […] circulating transnationally” (98). Hill argues that Nana’s character was not an original creation of Zola’s, but, rather, one of multiple “iterations” (102) of the same figure, emphasising the global, and contemporaneous, concern with similar issues across literatures.
allowing her author-creators to explore the issues surrounding female eroticism and desire much more freely than with more “traditional” heroines.

**The French Hygienist Movement and the British Contagious Diseases Acts**

The Contagious Diseases Acts in Great Britain placed the problem of prostitution and venereal disease, the “great social evil”, at the forefront of a number of concerns surrounding female sexuality and the double moral standard:

the issue being debated was whether society should tolerate prostitution as an inevitable phenomenon that should be regulated in the public interest – the public health position – or suppressed as an intolerable evil – the moral purity position. (Fisher xii-xiii)

At the centre of the various debates arising from this was the figure of the prostitute, who “could be viewed as an independent woman earning a living, or as a once-respectable person who had been reduced to selling herself. She could be seen as diseased and disruptive, or she could be sentimentalised as a victim” (Forward 54).

As I shall demonstrate throughout the chapter, Stephanie Forward’s description encapsulates the multiple, often contradictory, images of the prostitute both as a part of mid- to late-nineteenth century France and Britain, and as a literary character. In 1850, William Rathbone Greg distinguished three distinct types of prostitutes in Paris:

those who are registered, and are in consequence under the protection and surveillance of the authorities; those who exercise their profession in too clandestine or too respectable a manner to come under the supervision of the police; and those wretches who swarm in the common lodging houses, and in those haunts of vice and squalor near
the barracks and the outskirts of the city. (The Great Sin of Great Cities 30)

Joris-Karl Huysmans's Marthe, Edmond de Goncourt's La Fille Elisa and Émile Zola's Nana present two aspects of these three typologies. I believe that the difference in social status that transpires from Fisher's description can also be translated into a strong opposition between the “common prostitute” and what de Beauvoir refers to as the “hetaera”. The first is the lower-class woman for whom prostitution represented a means of survival - “there is perhaps no more telling commentary on the exploitative character of Victorian society than the fact that some working women regarded prostitution as the best of a series of unattractive offers” (Walkowitz 31). The latter is exemplified, for example, in the character of Nana, who moves up the ranks by becoming a “high-class” prostitute.

Before I move on to the examination of the prostitute in the œuvre of Zola, Goncourt, Huysmans, and Grand, it is necessary to establish an understanding of the historical context surrounding the publication of these works. Perhaps the first event which needs to be mentioned is the publication of Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet’s De la Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris in 1836. A physician, Parent-Duchâtelet was part of the French hygienist movement, and had previously published a volume on the sewers of Paris. One of the major concerns of hygienism, of which Parent-Duchâtelet was a major exponent, was “moralisation, […]

227 The Great Sin of Great Cities was a reprinted version of an article entitled “Prostitution”, which had been published in the Westminster Review in 1850.

228 Essais sur les Cloaques ou Egoûts de la Ville de Paris (1824). It is interesting that the man who would be responsible for most of the moral, administrative and public health reforms in France had published books on sewers and prostitutes, giving rise to what would become one of the most common comparisons when addressing the problem of venereal disease. In his Introduction to De la Prostitution, Parent-Duchâtelet wrote, “Si j’ai pu […] pénétrer dans les cloaques, […] et vivre […] au milieu de tout ce que les […] hommes renferment de plus abject et de plus dégoûtant, pourquoi rougirais-je d’aborder un cloaque d’une autre espèce (cloaque plus immonde, je l’avoue, que toutes les autres) […]?” (6) – “If I have been able […] to penetrate into the sewers, […] and to live […] in the midst of […] that which is most abject and disgusting, why would I blush upon entering another type of sewer (a sewer more filthy, I admit, than all others)[…]?”
a belief in the interconnection between the moral and material” (La Berge 42). Based on Parent-Duchâtelet’s investigations, an extensive survey on the living and health conditions of the prostitutes in Paris, a new method for the regulation of prostitution was proposed, which included the

active governmental surveillance of prostitutes and [the] creation of a sanitary administration to provide early treatment [of venereal diseases]. Paris set the example in the administrative treatment of prostitutes as a public health problem, employing toleration of prostitution, registration, police surveillance, and enforcement of sanitary measures. (La Berge 261)

The central concept behind such reforms was the view of prostitution as a “necessary evil” necessitating structure and organisation, an idea which resonates within the British imagination of the period too.

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Fig. 10. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. _L’Inspection Médicale_. 1894. Oil on cardboard on wood.

By legalising brothels, identifying prostitutes, and imposing regular sexual health checks, the objective was in effect to control the prostitute with the intention of protecting the client, and, as happened later in Britain, the “French system” eventually encountered heavy opposition.229 (See fig. 10: Toulouse-Lautrec

229 *The distinctive aspects of this regulation – the creation of officially sanctioned brothels, the inscription of prostitutes and the requirement that they submit to medical examinations for syphilis – became widely publicised and admired. So identified were these practices with the example of regulation in France that observers came to refer to them summarily as the ‘French system’. For all this admiration, however, they were only infrequently emulated and adopted, and then so only in a modified form. By the end of the nineteenth century, admiration gave way to criticism. The extended and extra-legal police powers that made these regulatory efforts possible, and the exclusive focus of regulation on female prostitutes, came to be seen increasingly as incompatible with an emerging*
famously spent time with prostitutes and in brothels, and much of his work revolves around these themes. Here we can see two prostitutes lifting their skirts as they wait to be inspected. This image is fascinating, as it documents these inspections from an artist’s point of view. Similarly to the Contagious Diseases Acts in Britain, the French system vilified the prostitute and did not attempt to control the sexual health of her male partners. The “CD Acts”, as they were then called, were passed in 1864, 1866 and 1869. The main purpose of these acts was to enforce the physical examination of women suspected of prostitution, and, for those found to be infected with syphilis or gonorrhoea, their subsequent quarantine in “Lock Hospitals”. After a campaign which began in 1870 and was led by Josephine Butler, the acts were finally repealed in 1886. The subject of the Contagious Diseases Acts had been and remained, nevertheless, representative of the double moral standard existing in Britain at the time, as well as one of the recurring preoccupations for the first-wave feminists.

_Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny”_

After this consideration of the historical context surrounding the issues of prostitution and venereal disease in France and Britain, I think it is also important to establish a literary context, and particularly so in Britain. The fact that the prostitute was not as present as a literary character _per se_ in the New Woman novel\(^{230}\), as opposed to the French naturalist and realist works which form the focus of my study, commitment to universal civil, political and (in limited cases) social rights among European nation states” (Aisenberg 14).

\(^{230}\) Although New Woman authors chose not to represent the prostitute as a character in their work, prostitution was very much a prominent theme. In Grand’s _Ideala_, the novel’s heroine goes to the theatre one night and sees her “husband in the stalls with a lady in flame-coloured robes” (1203) – a decisive moment which leads to her leaving her husband. In _The Heavenly Twins_, Mrs. Beale’s decision to ignore and not help the French young woman on the grounds of her ladylike modesty (Grand 160) will lead to Edith contracting syphilis from her husband. These secondary plotlines shed light on the significance of social purity to the representations of prostitution in New Woman fiction.
makes it necessary to acknowledge her presence in earlier works. I will now consider Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny” (1869). The poem precedes both the French works and the New Woman novels which are the focus of my study, and is written by a male author, allowing for a brief, yet relevant consideration of a previous literary depiction of the prostitute within the British panorama, but, perhaps more importantly, an understanding of a (British) male author’s perspective on prostitution. Whilst my work is concerned with the analysis of the differences and similarities between French male authors and British female authors in their representations of female sexuality, I believe that the subject of prostitution necessitates a consideration of the masculine point of view in Britain, in order to elucidate the possible influences of gender within this particular subject.

Rossetti’s “Jenny” went through various revisions between 1848 and 1869, the final published version of the poem coinciding with the last of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The musings of the poem’s narrator take the form of an interior monologue as the prostitute who gives the poem its title sleeps on his knee. The questions Jenny could answer are never asked, the narrator “wonder[s] what [she’s]

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231 Although I choose to focus on Rossetti’s poem here, the “fallen woman” is present in other, similar works. Amy Levy’s poem “Magdalen” (1884), for example, presents an interesting counterpoint to “Jenny”. While Rossetti silences the prostitute, Levy gives the woman in her poem a voice. Considered a “New Woman poet” Levy’s “dramatic monologues [are praised] for their radical repudiation of civic and sexual institutions oppressive to women” (Hetherington and Valman, 10). In “The Dramatic Monologue”, Cornelia Pearsall relates Rossetti and Levy’s poems: “When Jenny the ‘fallen woman’ rises, she might anticipate the statement that the ruined and dying speaker of Amy Levy’s ‘Magdalen’ […] imagines making to her seducer: ‘I am free; / [And] you, through all eternity, / Have neither part nor lot in me’” (77).

232 Furthermore, it is important to consider that the poem was buried with Elizabeth Siddal in 1862, and exhumed in 1865, a year after the passing of the first of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Rossetti’s final revisions of the poem thus taking place within the contemporary turmoil created by these reforms.

233 Daniel A. Harris discusses the importance of the interior monologue at length in his article “D. G. Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’: Sex, Money, and the Interior Monologue”. In it he stresses the significance of the narrator’s ability to mould the issues the poem addresses: “The monologist encounters a speech situation that bars him from communication: the ‘auditor’ is unconscious. He is thus liberated to create his world – indeed, his auditor – at will” (199). Cornelia Pearsall also discusses this in her “Dramatic Monologue”.

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thinking of” and reflects, “Suppose I were to think aloud, / What if to her all this were said?” As Daniel A. Harris notes,

speech is a social contract, a denial of alienation from communal relations. In “Jenny” the protagonist’s dilemma is whether to treat the whore as a human being by addressing her “aloud”. [...] The whore, having no valid social existence, need not be represented poetically save as a figure (trope, icon) in the man’s imagination. (200)

This reflects the mid-Victorian tendency to posit the prostitute as “unreal, figural, textual, as mere representation” (Psomiades 217 n.21). Furthermore, the recurrence of Jenny’s supposed “shame” gives way to feelings of responsibility - “If of myself you think at all, / What is the thought?” – and guilt - “perhaps you’re merely glad / That I’m not drunk or ruffianly / And let you rest upon my knee” – on the part of the narrator-client, allowing the reader a privileged insight into the complexity of the client’s relationship with the prostitute. The narrator’s feelings as he watches Jenny bring forth reflections on purity and fallenness, as he compares Jenny with his cousin Nell, uncovering the similarities between them. A high point in Victorian self-consciousness, “Jenny”’s interest lies in the male perception of the prostitute.234 One cannot help but be reminded of Rossetti’s painting, Found (see fig. 11), which was left unfinished but the composition of which is generally situated between 1853 and 1859, coinciding with the writing of “Jenny”.

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Fig. 11. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Found. 1853 – 9, unfinished. Oil on canvas.

234 Baudelaire wrote “Allégorie” in 1857, in which an altogether different masculine perspective on the prostitute is presented. The woman in the poem is characterised as a femme fatale, mocking debauchery, laughing in the face of Death (144).
The painting’s depiction of the prostitute as a shameful victim sheds light on some of the poem’s concerns. Jenny is “both pure and corrupt” (Psomiades 44), as the narrator highlights the possible causes of her resort to prostitution: “Jenny, you know the city now”. In Found, the prostitute is seen as turning away from the man who is trying to “save” her, the parallel image of a calf trapped in a net emphasising the woman’s position as a victim, similarly to Jenny, who is “thankful for a little rest”. I think Rossetti presents ideas and raises questions which are central to the figure of the prostitute as a literary character. By emphasising the male point of view throughout the poem, we can gain some understanding of the way in which the prostitute is perceived by her client. Furthermore, considering the poem alongside the painting allows for a clear understanding of the prostitute as a multifaceted creature, an object who is silent, asleep, and a victim, at once pure, yet corrupted by the environment.

The Emblem of the Desiring Self

In “Seduction, Prostitution, and the Control of Female Desire in Popular Antebellum Fiction”, Karen J. Renner discusses the representation of prostitutes in American fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. Although the fiction she discusses in this article does not strictly form part of the body of work that is the focus of my own study, Renner’s analysis of the representation of female sexual desire through her chosen fictions is extremely interesting. Renner argues that, far from undermining and providing a contrast to the “Angel in the House”, these literary renditions of prostitutes actually reinforced the ideal of an almost asexual womanhood through their constant reiteration of the idea of the “dependency of female desire on male impetus” (169). As she puts it,
In fictional depictions and nonfictional investigations alike, seduction came to be considered a typical precursory event in the life story of the prostitute, one that transformed a woman who could be seen as an active deviant into a victim. (170)

The image of the “fallen woman”, fallen through male agency, therefore not only served to victimise the prostitute, but “satisfied fantasies of male control over female desire and thus reinforced the ideology of passionlessness that they seemed to rebuke” (Renner 191). It seems therefore pertinent to liken these fictions of seduction to the British renditions of the prostitute: Rossetti’s “Jenny” and Sarah Grand’s depiction of the prostitute as a victim of the client and the double sexual standard. Zola’s *Nana* or Huysmans’ *Marthe* provide a stark contrast to the far more muted presence of prostitution – or of characters who are prostitutes – in New Woman novels such as Grand’s *The Beth Book* or *The Heavenly Twins*. While the French authors allow the figure of the prostitute to become the focus of their works, Sarah Grand, for example, allows ideas about the Contagious Diseases Acts to permeate certain plotlines, yet never shows us the women affected by them. Once again, the aesthetisation of the French clashes with the more educational and sociological aims of the New Woman authors, yet I believe there is some common ground in the claims that are made through their representations of prostitution. In fact, whilst Renner argues that the recurring, almost omnipresent, “seduction narrative” exonerates the female prostitute and prevents her from having a sexual subjectivity, I believe that the absence of any such explicitly depicted plotline in the works discussed here, as well as the importance given to the commodifying of the female body not only indicate otherwise, but present the prostitute as an assertive, subjective sexual being. Furthermore, the increasingly blurred boundaries between
the wife and the prostitute highlight the latter as an emblem of active sexual desire and subjectivity. The idea of female desire necessitating to be awakened by male action, or, to use Renner's term, “impetus”, is one that is constantly addressed in the French and British fiction my work deals with. We have in fact seen how the reflection on sensation figures heavily in New Woman fiction, and how the will to abandon thought is represented in naturalist and realist literature. The independence in their sexual awakening that is given to Maupassant, Zola, Grand and Dowie's heroines also shows that the existence of a female sexual subjectivity is one of the main concerns of these authors.

In *The Heavenly Twins*, outraged by her husband’s allusions to her relationship with “the Tenor”, Angelica asks her husband “Are you insinuating that *my good conduct depended upon his good character*?” (Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* 549, my italics). In *Nana*, after realising the harm she has done, the novel’s eponymous heroine reiterates the importance of the men’s role in the creation of herself as a harmful destroyer of homes and fortunes, seeing herself very differently from the seductress:

> sans eux, mon cher, sans *ce qu'ils ont fait de moi*, je serais dans un couvent à prier le bon Dieu, car j'ai toujours eu de la religion... Et zut, après tout, s'ils y ont laissé leur monnaie et leur peau. C'est leur faute! Je n'y suis pour rien, moi! (421, my italics)

Whilst Angelica’s question resonates with the reader and succinctly demonstrates not only the subjectivity and agency of woman, but, more importantly, her

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235 It is also interesting to note that Angelica dresses as and takes on the role of “the Boy” in her relationship with “the Tenor”. If we are to believe that a woman’s “good conduct depends on a man’s good character”, by turning Angelica into a man, Sarah Grand invalidates these assumptions and grants both the man and the woman their sexual subjectivity.

236 “If it weren’t for them, my dear, if it weren’t for *what they have made of me*, I would be praying in a convent, because I have always been religious... After all, if they have lost their money and their lives, it’s entirely their fault! It’s got nothing to do with me!”
responsibility and independence, Nana’s almost childish self-defence is easily debunked and actually serves to remove male agency from her transformation into a seductress, by highlighting the lack of sincerity in her claim. Nana’s statement exemplifies de Beauvoir’s notion that free individuals blame only themselves for their failures, while “c’est par autrui que tout arrive à la femme” (II, 489).237

In her attempt to defend herself from the general public’s accusations, Nana insists on the lack of enjoyment in her relationships with her clients/lovers. Her insistence on “men” having made her what she is, is therefore representative of a sort of revenge of woman against man, and thus serves not to emphasise female passionlessness, as Renner contends, but to further reinforce the very idea of female sexual subjectivity, even in prostitution. De Beauvoir comments:

[L]a courtisane a la réputation d’être frigide. [...] elle risque de subir l’ascendant d’un homme qui l’exploitera ou l’accaparera ou la fera souffrir. [...] sa révolte contre l’arrogance mâle s’exprime par sa frigidité.

(II, 443)238

This lack of pleasure as revolt results in a strong expression of autonomy and a reclaiming of the self through sexuality. If, as Renner suggests, “constructing the prostitute as a victim of seduction suggests that her sexual masquerades are the result of the anger and desire for revenge that she feels as a wronged woman, rather than a performance calculated for profit” (Renner 174), the very presence of a reflection on sexual enjoyment, or indeed, the lack of it, redirects the focus of attention towards the woman’s own personal experience of the sexual act.

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237 “Everything that happens to women is mediated by others”.
238 The courtesan has the reputation of being frigid. [...] she risks suffering the control of a man who will exploit, monopolise, or make her suffer. [...] she expresses her revolt against masculine arrogance through her frigidity.”
De Beauvoir finds an explanation for women’s animalistic sexuality in her restrictive conditions of life:

Dans la mesure où la femme étouffe dans un morne gynécée – maison close ou foyer bourgeois – elle se réfugiera aussi dans le confort et le bien-être; d’ailleurs, si elle poursuit avidement la volupté, c’est bien souvent parce qu’elle est frustrée [...]. Si elle apparaît à l’homme comme un être tellement “physique”, c’est que sa condition l’incite à attacher une extrême importance à son animalité. (II, 485)<sup>239</sup>

Throughout Zola’s novel, the character of Nana is repeatedly associated with animalistic imagery. She is in fact described as a “bête en folie” (Zola 54) or a “jument parfaite” (54),<sup>240</sup> to give just two examples. The descriptions of Nana are altogether menacing, yet enticing: “sa gorge d’amazone dont les pointes roses se tenaient levées et rigides comme des lances, ces larges hanches qui roulaient dans un balancement voluptueux, ses cuisses de blonde grasse” (53).<sup>241</sup> The point of view becomes distinctly masculine here, as the male characters observing Nana, as well as the reader, find themselves together in the fear and curiosity caused by the sight of her body. What is interesting here is the way in which the imagery describing Nana’s body moves from the animalistic to the Amazonian, perfectly encapsulating the shadow of danger that lies beneath the surface of her sensuous body.

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<sup>239</sup> “Insomuch as woman suffocates in a boring gynaecaeum – whether it’s the brothel or the bourgeois home – she will seek refuge in comfort and well-being; moreover, her avid pursuit of sensuousness is often rooted in her frustration [...]. Man perceives her as such a ‘physical’ being precisely because her condition incites her to give such an extreme significance to her animality”.

<sup>240</sup> “A crazed animal”; “a perfect mare”.

<sup>241</sup> “Her Amazon’s breasts, whose spear-like pink tips remained upright and stiff, those wide hips which swayed voluptuously, those full-bodied blonde’s thighs”.
Nana is “un exemple éclatant de la nature humaine réduite à l’état animal” (Krakowski 198), and in this she presents an extremely valid counterpoint to the characters who have been studied in the two previous chapters. Whilst such diverse characters as *The Heavenly Twins’s* Evadne or *Une Page d'Amour’s* Hélène are representative of the dichotomy of feeling and thought within female desire, eroticism and sexuality, a character like Nana, through her very nature, and her “function” within the text, but also more broadly, within society itself, as a prostitute, enables Zola to explore the naturalistic and animalistic side of female sexuality much more in-depth than any of his previous or, indeed, later novels. This reaches its highest point in the chapter in which Nana goes to the races, and roots for a horse which has been named after her, and which becomes “the metaphor of Nana’s bestial nature” (Beizer 187). The animalism of the prostitute can, according to de Beauvoir, be ascribed to women’s need to counterbalance the degradation of the sexual act with either an animalistic state or love. She makes a reference to the Polish psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940) in the following passage, about the mechanisms that occur within women during the sexual act:

Stekel ajoute que “pour beaucoup de femmes, la chute dans l’animalité est la condition de l’orgasme”. Elles voient dans l’amour physique un avilissement qui ne saurait se concilier avec des sentiments d’estime et d’affection. Mais pour d’autres au contraire c’est par l’estime, la tendresse, l’admiration de l’homme que cet avilissement peut être aboli. (Beauvoir II, 547)

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242 “A superb example of human nature reduced to an animalistic state”.
243 “Stekel adds that, ‘for many women, animalism is the prerequisite for the orgasm’. They see physical love as a degradation which cannot be reconciled with feelings of esteem and affection. For others, on the contrary, it is through esteem, tenderness, and admiration of the man that this degradation can be abolished”.
There seems to be a need to reconcile the sexual act with a sentiment, a feeling, which supplements, explains, and, in a way, validates it, similarly to the idea of love as a sublimation of desire discussed in Chapter One. However, the very same impulse, incited by the need to accept or to enjoy fully the sexual act, can also be validated by supplanting the sublimation of desire through love with an extreme acceptance of it as a purely physical act, which must necessarily happen through an accentuation of the woman’s animalistic nature.

In her study on female eroticism in Zola’s fiction, Chantal Bertrand-Jennings notes that “[s]ouvent [la femme] symbolise le principe de la matière, alors que l’homme incarne presque toujours celui de l’esprit” (49). In one of the first passages in which the reader is introduced to the character of Sabine, Vandeuvres says about her: “je me defie des cuisses”. This comment highlights the way in which the image of women as seen by the male characters in the novel is reduced to an almost purely physical entity. The association of the sexual woman with the animalistic, and even the bestial – more suggestive of the threat and menace inherent in the female erotic self – is given through the eyes of the male characters in the novels. Nana, however, manages to escape objectification through what I will refer to as the “principles of animalité and tendresse”, principles of animality and tenderness. Based on de Beauvoir’s idea of the need for woman to either become animalistic or to be in love expressed above, one can see how the dichotomy of Nana’s purely physical or loving roles in fact confer upon her the power of her own sexuality. Furthermore, the passage from the animalistic to the bestial mirrors that of the animalistic to the Amazonian: the author is not merely interested in showing the

244 “Often, woman symbolises what is material, whilst man almost always incarnates the spiritual principle”.
245 “I do not trust the thighs”.

possibility of a primal female nature, but has a clear desire to expose the perils attached to it when it becomes employed against man.

**The prostitute as a hyperbole of female eroticism**

Whilst Anna Krakowski argues that “sans souligner la suprématie mâle, [Zola] donne à ses héroïnes une destinée propre et ne les peint point en fonction de l’homme” (Krakowski 18), the presentation, not only of female sexuality, but of female characters in general in Zola’s novel makes it difficult to agree with her statement. In fact, “the wholeness of Nana is not. [sic] She is devoured, dismembered, and [...] deconstructed [...] by the figures that speak her” (Barnett 100). As I now hope to demonstrate, the complexity of Zola’s depiction of the female as a sexual **subject** in *Nana* is highly dependent on the overarching presence of a male “otherness” which not only serves as a viewpoint, but also provides the novel’s title character with her very identity. Krakowski points out that “Zola veut voir la femme affranchie non seulement de la domination arbitraire du sexe fort, mais aussi de ses propres préjugés, et de ses propres faiblesses” (50).

It is in fact only through the figure of the prostitute that a strong assertion of women’s sexuality could be made. This is due to a fairly simple fact: the prostitute was virtually the only “type” of woman who could experience several, and several kinds of, relationships with men, and be promiscuous; she thus becomes, in literature, a sort of symbolic representative of the female gender in its most extreme forms, when considered from a sexual point of view. The prostitute’s ability to have several partners is also recognised in Maupassant’s “Imprudence”. In this short

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246 “Without emphasising male supremacy, Zola gives his heroines the possibility of their own fate, and does not depict them in function of man”.

247 “Zola wishes to see woman freed not only from the arbitrary domination of the stronger sex, but also from her own prejudices and weaknesses”.

story, the young wife is disgusted when she discovers her husband had had many sexual partners, most of them prostitutes, before marrying her - "Oh! Que c'est dégoûtant, tout de même, plus de cent femmes!" (270). Her husband explains to her that each of his sexual partners represented a new, different, exciting experience, and that no two women are quite the same. It is by understanding his own experience with prostitutes that she realises that multiple partners are also possible for a woman, and the short story ends, somewhat tantalisingly, with her dreamingly saying to herself “les hommes aussi […] doivent être différents. […] Oh! oui! Ça doit être amusant tout de même!” (272-3)

The fact that this realisation comes as a result of them acting out her fantasy of being taken to one of the restaurants he used to frequent with prostitutes highlights the positive impact of this character’s own, playful, experience of simulated prostitution. Taking the idea of promiscuity further, Zola’s Nana’s multiple relations with men enable the writer to put forth more clearly some crucial views concerning the dynamics of relationships between man and woman and to determine female sexuality.

Nana as woman against “all men” seems to be exemplified in the passage in which Muffat finds her with Chouard: “près d’elle, sous le reflet de neige de sa gorge, au milieu de son triomphe de déesse, se vautrait une honte, une décrépitude, une ruine comique et lamentable, le marquis de Chouard en chemise” (415). At the height of her success, this image seems to signify not only Nana’s triumph, but also the debasement of the men who are subdued by her sexual power, and it is not a simple coincidence that Muffat will definitively leave her after this. It is no coincidence that Zola chose to make Muffat and Chouard members of the higher
classes: the novel, in fact, presents a fascinating study of the relationship between sexuality and class.

**Sexuality and Class**

During the nineteenth century in France, Lloyd argues that “the labouring classes were seen as [...] a primitive source of raw sexual energy, regarded with fascinated prurience by bourgeois onlookers” (Lloyd 56). The idea of class is one which poses itself in a very strong manner throughout Zola's novel. De Beauvoir observes that “dans [l']hostilité [de la prostituée] à l'égard du client entre souvent un ressentiment de classe” (II, 437). The fabricated, chimeric expression of a higher morality within the higher classes is exemplified in a conversation between Count Muffat and Chouard, in which, the reader is informed, “le marquis [...] parla morale. Les hautes classes devaient l'exemple” (Zola 102). Rather ironically, both these men will succumb to Nana's charms, the higher class simply being dominated by the lower class. The sexuality of prostitutes, or in the case of Nana, courtesans, is so widely accepted to be savage and wild that, at one point in the novel, Labordette tells Muffat a duel caused by Nana would be “ridicule” (406), Zola going so far as to depict the very negation of a remote possibility of respectability. This bourgeois conception of working-class female sexuality permeates Zola's work, and, given the ample representation, in terms of characterisation, of both the working class, and the higher classes of Parisian society, “it is striking [...] how Nana’s social and professional peers [...] never see her as anything but a second-rate boulevard actress who has had the fortune to strike it rich” (Clark 62), accentuating the biased

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251 “The prostitute’s hostility towards the client is often accompanied by a resentment of class”.
252 “the marquess [...] spoke of morality. The higher classes had to set the example”.
253 “Ridiculous”.
depiction of the world of prostitution and the theatre with which *Nana* deals. The
prostitute’s “‘sexually deviant’ behaviour”, Judith Walkowitz argues, “must be
measured against the standards of [her] own social class, whose norms were often
distinct, if not fully autonomous, from the values of the dominant culture” (9). The
fear of women's unbridled sexuality reflects itself upon the depictions of women of
different classes as resembling each other. In *Nana*, Countess Sabine, Count
Muffat's wife, is an extremely interesting double to the novel's title character. From
the first time she is presented, the men around the countess comment on her
physical resemblance to Nana (101-3). As the novel progresses, not only will these
two women share Count Muffat, but they will also interchange lovers. The first time
Nana sees Countess Sabine, when driving past her in her carriage in the
countryside, not only are these two women similarly positioned, both having
properties in the country and enjoying the same high-class lifestyle, but Nana
comments and declares Muffat's wife to be “une pas grand chose”, adding that “on
sent bien ça, entre femmes” (196).254 This comment, or, more precisely, this clearly
sexual evaluation of her future lover's wife, suddenly positions Nana on the very
same level as all the respectable women frequented by her male admirers, and at
the same time, perhaps more interestingly, defines sexuality as the only element in
which the male characters are interested when discussing women. Furthermore,
Zola goes so far as to insist on an idea which he had touched upon in the earlier *La
Curée*, that of comparing the social gatherings of courtesans and higher class
women. Here, a get-together at Count Muffat and Countess Sabine's house is
described as almost identical to a dinner at Nana's house: “comme chez la comtesse
Sabine, on s'occupa longuement du comte de Bismarck. Un instant, on fut de

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254 “One can tell these things, among women”.


It seems that these strong parallelisms serve to signify the similarity of women, regardless of class. This effectively designates the "category" of women as transcending the boundaries of class. Nana and her friends and "colleagues" in fact have the "même vie oisive, les mêmes grands besoins, le même gout du luxe, [...] et, enfin, le contact avec la même société masculine" (Krakowski 187). The "interchangeability" of these women in fact serves to eliminate the differences and boundaries of class and profession, and while it can be argued that, as de Beauvoir contends, this implies men’s deferral of all responsibility for immorality onto women, I think that there is more to be said about the reasons behind Zola’s repeated allusions to such an idea. While the image of all women resembling each other is, on the surface, undeniably negative, perhaps the real focus of interest here should be on the sexually liberating aspect of such an idea. By eliminating the difference, albeit momentarily, between prostitutes and "high-class ladies", Zola enables a freer depiction of female sexuality to take place. Contrary to the New Woman novels, in which the prostitute is silenced to give preference to a more educated, socially engaged discourse that is made for them, thus somehow reinforcing the image of the prostitute as "separate", the French naturalist gives the prostitute a voice. In doing so, Zola entrusts the prostitute with an extremely

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255 “As at Countess Sabine’s, the subject of conversation was, for a long time, Count Bismarck. For a moment, it seemed they were in the Muffats’s living room again; only the women had changed”.

256 “Same life of leisure, the same great needs, the same taste for luxury, [...] and, finally, the contact with the same male society”.

257 “À elle d’endosser toute l’immoralité des mâles: ce n’est pas seulement la prostituée, ce sont toutes les femmes qui servent d’égout au palais lumineux et sain dans lequel habitent les honnêtes gens” (Beauvoir II, 499) – “She has to take on all the immorality of men: it is not only the prostitute, but all women who serve as the sewer of the salubrious palace in which honest people dwell”.

258 Just as Rossetti "silences Jenny entirely, puts her to sleep" (D. Harris 202).

259 Today, the "pro-sex" and "sex-positive" branches of feminism do the same, speaking for prostitutes. These feminists seek to eliminate the social stigma attached to prostitution, and sometimes even propose an alternative view of sex work as empowering women through their exploitation of their own bodies for economical purposes.
significant subjectivity, which ultimately allows for a stronger, extremely direct exposing of the contemporary problems surrounding the "great social evil". It could also be argued that perhaps authors such as Sarah Grand did not feel that it was appropriate for them, as women, to explicitly present prostitutes as characters in their novels. Judith Walkowitz emphasises that

[the struggle for female power and autonomy was not without historical ironies. In their defense of prostitutes, feminist repealers were still limited by their own class bias and by their continued adherence to a separate-sphere ideology that stressed women’s purity, moral supremacy, and domestic virtue. (7)]

Perhaps, then, one of the most significant differences between the British and French authors’ depiction of sexuality and prostitution is effectively rooted in the male experience of it. The New Woman’s insistence on a pure, victimised image of the prostitute strongly opposes itself to “the doubled female figure, both pure and corrupt” (Psomiades 44) that is found in “Jenny” and the French works.

At the highest point of her social status, Nana becomes a sort of role-model for women of the higher classes: “Elle donnait le ton, de grandes dames l’imitaient” (327). What is interesting here, though, is not Nana’s successful “entry” and, in a way, acceptance into the world of these “ladies”, but the circularity which takes place within this search for “class” which seems to be exclusively relegated to the female world: Nana exhibits “une distinction nerveuse de chatte de race, une aristocratie du vice” (327). Her imitation of these women is so successful that they end up imitating her in return. On the other hand, despite her luxurious life and

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260 Kathy Psomiades uses this phrase whilst referring to “Jenny”, yet I find this to be a perfect way of describing the way not only Jenny, but Nana, Marthe and Elisa, as well as the idea of prostitution in general, are rendered in the male-authored texts in my study.

261 “She set the tone, great ladies imitated her”.

262 “The nervous distinction of a purebred cat, an aristocratic vice”.
surroundings, Nana acts almost as an avenger of her class by reclaiming her background and imposing the misery of her childhood on her lovers (Bertrand-Jennings 69), at dinner, for example. Here, Nana becomes the very embodiment of a statement about the miseries of class oppression coming back to haunt the oppressors. As Chantal Jennings writes in her article on space in Nana,

l’invasion […] du grand monde par le demi-monde va se faire par le truchement de la femme et de la force d’attraction qu’elle exerce sur l’homme […]. Les hommes jouent un rôle de liaison : présents à la fois dans les deux mondes, comme en témoignent les deux chapitres des réceptions chez les Muffat et chez Nana, ils deviennent porteurs de la lésion qu’ils introduisent au sein de leur propre société. (769)^263

In La Fille Elisa, Goncourt positions the prostitute as an outcast of society, paralleling her situation with that of the soldier, who has no family, no home, no wife: “toutes les propensions, entraînant le soldat à aimer la prostituée, sollicitent la prostituée à rendre au soldat amour pour amour” (99).^264 Moreover, Goncourt goes further in the creation of a discourse on class within sexuality and prostitution by reflecting on the opposing tastes of bourgeois clients, who are said not to mind the prototype of the “fille crottée” (Goncourt 87),^265 and insisting upon the working-class man’s preference for women who will simulate elegance in dress, manner, and speech. In this case, therefore, sexuality is, almost by definition, transcendence of class boundaries. In Huysmans’ novel, this idea of transcendence, or, more specifically, of

^263 “The invasion […] of the higher classes by the lower ones happens through the intervention of woman and the strength of the attraction she has on man […]. The men play a connecting role: present in both worlds, as is apparent in the two chapters of the receptions at the Muffats’ and Nana’s houses, they become the bearers of the scourge which they introduce into their own society”.
^264 “All the propensions which bring the soldier to love the prostitute, encourage the prostitute to return that same love to the soldier”.
^265 “Dirty girl”.
the negativity of it, is resolved in the final scene, which sees Ginginet on an autopsy table:

[t]hat it is not Marthe’s body but that of the actor Ginginet, her sometime lover and protector, that is autopsied at the novel’s end reflects the role that this argotic, aggressive, grotesquely ugly proletarian has played throughout Marthe’s story: he is her double; his explosive violence codes as male the energy of her disruptive sexuality; his dismembered cadaver is the punishment for the attack on bourgeois rectitude that is their common pursuit and that destabilises their gender difference in a common subversive class identity.

(Bernheimer 238)

The relationship between Nana and Satin resolves many of the issues posed in Zola’s novel about class and gender clashes and conflicts. Through their relationship, which Zola repeatedly hints at as being of a lesbian nature, Nana and Satin exclude the male “component” of the couple. Through their poverty-stricken background, they also challenge the social stratum to which belong the men in their intimate circle of friends. Together, Nana and Satin fiercely oppose and emerge victorious from their violent relationships to the men in their lives. Later on in the novel, their revindication of their humble pasts and families also presents an imposition, not only upon the men who surround them, but, more importantly, on the upper classes: “les deux femmes […] s’imposaient et regnaient, avec le tranquille abus de leur sexe et le mépris avoué de l’homme” (352). Through their sexual domination over them, they manage to successfully convey their need to overturn the social oppression felt by their equals. As Chantal Bertrand-Jennings writes, Nana

266 “The two women […] imposed themselves and reigned, with the calm abuse of their sex and their admitted disdain of men”.

and Satin's relationship presents a form of rebellion against the slavery that is
prostitution (Bertrand-Jennings 58). The parallelism between prostitution and slavery
is apparent throughout the novel, as Nana obtains luxury, but is obliged to fulfil
certain obligations towards her "benefactors", Nana becoming, towards the end,
"rentière de la bêtise et de l'ordure des mâles" (326). Furthermore, "Nana's
bisexuality [...] has obvious analogies with" her "auto-seduction in the mirror. Its
premise is open contempt for the male" (Bernheimer 226) through the assertion of
the existence of a sexual life without a man, exemplifying the way in which her "rôle
dans les rapports amoureux est l'inverse de celui reconnu par la suprématie mâle"
(Bertrand-Jennings 67).

A Sexual Hierarchy?

"Elle avait toujours tremblé devant la loi, cette puissance inconnue, cette
vengeance des hommes qui pouvaient la supprimer" (Nana 261, my italics).
Here, in one of the relatively few passages, especially if compared with Huysmans's
Marthe or Goncourt's La Fille Elisa, in which such a strong fear of the law is
expressed, the police is subtly, yet extremely powerfully equated with masculinity.
The "male other" therefore limits not only the female's powerful sexuality, but the
prostitute's means of living, and, by extension, woman's place in the working world.
Significantly, when taking a look at this sentence, which is really an avowal on the
part of Nana, one notices that she is afraid of this "vengeance" of men, thus clearly
implying an admittance to some sort of wrongdoing on her part, as a woman, against
man. Female friendships or affairs are presented as a safe haven from masculine

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267 "A shareholder in the stupidity and foulness of men".
268 "Role in love relationships is opposed to that which is recognised by male supremacy".
269 "She had always trembled in front of the law, that unknown power, that vengeance of men who could eliminate her".
hostility – “Oh! les cochons, oh! les cochons!... Vois-tu, n’en faut plus de ces cochons-là!” Satin tells Nana after Fontan has left her. “Très gaie par métier et par nature, elle devenait alors lugubre, résumant sa vie dans ce cri qui revenait sans cesse: ‘Oh! Que les hommes m’embêtent!’” (Zola, *Nana*).

It is possible to say that, in all three French novels, female friendships and communities present the possibility of some sort of self-contained female world which the characters live in, with its own female-only spaces.

De Beauvoir’s description of prostitutes’ need for a “‘contre-univers’ d’où elles puissent défier les mâles” (II, 502) echoes Zola’s female spaces. For example, during the time in the novel in which Nana has a relationship with Satin, they often move in a world which does not include men at all, such as when they frequent the *tables d’hôtes* in which only women dine. While de Beauvoir states that women are often too ambivalent and lack the conviction to construct the “‘monde du ressentiment’ que leur rancune souhaite” (II, 502), what has previously been said about the way the characters in the French novels view men counters any ambivalence. This is not to say, however, that these “female-only spaces” are devoid of their own hierarchical structures or conflicts. This is exemplified when Madame Robert and Nana compete for Satin’s attention, and Nana is said to repeatedly go to the restaurant bringing all her other female friends, dressed in their best clothes and jewels, to make Satin jealous. A similar idea can also be found in *Marthe* and in *La

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270 “Oh! The pigs, the pigs!... You see, we don’t need those pigs!”

271 “Very gay due to her work and her nature, she became sinister, summarising her life in this cry, which repeated itself continuously ‘Oh! How men bother me!”

272 “A ‘counter-universe’ from which they will be able to defy men”.

273 “In the 1880s and 1890s, as gender anxiety reigned and naturalism gained force in art and literature, the trickle of discourse on Parisian homosexuals turned to a flood, particularly where lesbians were concerned. Émile Zola’s *Nana* [...] launched the upsurge by confirming lesbians as legitimate [...] subjects of the literary gaze. A [...] scene in the novel unfolds at a lesbian *table d’hôtes* [...] Zola’s notebooks reveal that he based his description on an actual visit to Louise Taillandier’s *table d’hôtes* at 17 Rue des Martyrs” (Choquette 152-3).

274 “world of resentment’ their rancour wishes for”.
Fille Elisa, albeit in a slightly different way, in the portrayal of Marthe's workplace and the brothel in which Elisa lives for some time – and where, incidentally, she also has a very strong female friendship, much like Nana herself – female worlds in which men do not belong, and only enter as part of the commerce of sex.

In Marthe, for example, the heroine's place of work, a small false pearl factory, which only employs women, represents the place where, particularly due to only having contact with other young women, “une fille est perdue dès qu'elle voit d'autres filles: les conversations des collégiens ne sont rien près de celles des ouvrières; l'atelier, c'est la pierre de touche des vertus, l'or y est rare, le cuivre abondant” (Huysmans, Marthe 20).275 One will logically ask oneself what the role of sexuality within these spaces is. As De Beauvoir puts it, “fatiguée des hommes, dégoûtée d’eux, ou souhaitant une diversion, c’est dans les bras d’une autre femme que souvent la prostituée cherchera détente et plaisir” (II, 435).276 Whilst Huysmans and Goncourt choose not to focus on the theme of female homosexuality, Zola’s Nana deals with this issue at length. The relationship between Nana and Satin is quite explicitly lesbian from the night in which Fontan leaves Nana. The depiction of this relationship endows Nana (and Satin) with agency and sexual independence. Because it is out of choice, and not necessity, that they are together, and because the relationship does not constitute their means of living, the power struggles at play differ greatly from those of a heterosexual relationship. Despite the hierarchical structures that form even between women, these female lovers are equal. Zola's delineation of their relationship serves to highlight “the antagonisms between sapphism and bourgeois ideals of marriage” (S. Marcus 15), and this is emphasised

275 “A young girl is lost as soon as she sees other young girls: young men's conversations are nothing next to theirs; the workshop is the touchstone of virtue, in it, gold is rare, and copper is abundant”.
276 “Tired of men, disgusted by them, or wanting a diversion, it is in the arms of another woman that the prostitute will often seek relaxation and pleasure”.
in the scene in which Nana and Satin kiss at dinner in front of Nana's male
entourage. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note how the difference in register of
the vocabulary used between women in Zola's novel is strongly opposed to the
aristocratic poses these women assume otherwise. Women are in fact much more
direct and the almost vulgar language they use to refer to themselves – words such
as “salope”\textsuperscript{277} are used to insult each other, and the expression “sale mufe”\textsuperscript{278} is
often used to insult men – denotes great aggressiveness and competitiveness
between them.\textsuperscript{279}

The fierce rivalry between Madame Robert and Nana highlights the inherent
flaws within such spaces, or, in this case, communities. What is almost disappointing
here is that while these women succeed in creating a space devoid of the male
supremacy which otherwise permeates every aspect of their lives, they end up re-
enacting the very struggles which have generated their hostility towards men. There
is a “dominant” person in the couple, rivalries and envious attitudes between women,
and, instead of a freer space, they have only duplicated the one they already knew.
Perhaps Zola wished to denounce the incorrigibility of the human mind, presenting
hierarchical sexual structures and power struggles as inherent to any relation,
whether between the sexes, or “within one sex”, as it were. When contrasted with the
admittedly less flamboyant, yet more educated, and certainly sexually devoid,
communities of women found in \textit{The Heavenly Twins}, but, more particularly, in \textit{The
Beth Book}, the greater success of female spaces “with an explicit purpose”, such as
the discussion group Beth participates in, is undeniable. The aesthetisation, and, to a

\textsuperscript{277} “Bitch”.
\textsuperscript{278} “Dirty blackguard”.
\textsuperscript{279} Linda Beane Katner points out that Zola’s efforts to accurately render the language and vocabulary
of the working classes in his novels, and particularly in the case of his female characters, have the
effect of “triply expos[ing them] to readers – by their inclusion in the novel, by the use of authentic
language, and by the free indirect style. These techniques allow us to enter into the women’s private
thoughts, which are personally expressed” (57).
certain extent, eroticising, found in the French literature falls short of the more precise, sociological concerns addressed in the New Woman novel.

In his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Michel Foucault writes about the mechanisms of power within sexuality: “[c]es appels, ces esquives, ces incitations circulaires ont aménagé autour des sexes et des corps, non pas des frontières à ne pas franchir, mais *les spirales perpétuelles du pouvoir et du plaisir*” (62). Zola's *Nana* is a novel which is continuously dealing with power and the turning of the sexual act or couple into a hierarchical structure. Nana's various relationships, with Georges, with Count Muffat, with Satin, to name but a few examples, are all invested with different degrees of domination and / or submission on the part of Nana and the other person. Moreover, these characters have themselves other relationships which extend this chain of sexual power and submission. An interesting example of this occurs during the time in which Nana has a relationship with Satin. On one hand, Nana dominates Satin as she has her almost exclusively to herself. Madame Robert, however, manages to take Satin away from Nana on certain occasions, and it is on these rare occasions that a glimpse of Nana as subjugated by the need to reconquer Satin can be seen. Zola seems in fact to consciously construct these chains of sexual power within the novel: when Nana lives with Fontan he mistreats her, but she has her relationship with Satin, and takes care of her, as she has a violent man in her life too, for example. De Beauvoir notes,

> Puisqu’elle est de toute façon condamnée à la dépendance, plutôt que d’obéir à des tyrans – parents, mari, protecteur – elle préfère servir un dieu; elle choisit de vouloir si ardemment son esclavage qu’il lui apparaîtra comme l’expression de sa liberté; elle s’efforcera de

280 These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed [sic], but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (Foucault, Trans. Hurley 45).
The question of domestic abuse is one which is found again and again in narratives concerning prostitutes during the second half of the nineteenth century. As we have said earlier, Nana’s time with Fontan is filled with violence and abuse, not only physical, but psychological and economic, too. Huysmans also describes this as “l'amour peureux, l'amour ne vivant que de brutalités et d'injures, le système nerveux bandé à l'excès et ne se détendant que sous le poids de la douleur physique, les joies de la bourbe, cette haine attendrie que l'on porte au mâle qui vous fouaille” (127-8).

The final scene of Zola’s novel further reinforces the male / female dichotomy which is present throughout it. “As putrid body”, Gallagher argues, “the prostitute maintains complex relations with the corpse in the symbolic imagination of these times” (211), and these two images come together in an extremely powerful manner here. Only the women whom Nana had known during her lifetime are present at her deathbed, as if to emphasise their immunity, not only to contagion from smallpox, which all the men downstairs talk about and dread, but, by extension, to the golden fly’s symbolic power of destruction and putrefaction. “Le cadavre commençait à empoisonner la chambre” (438), yet the women remain to keep Nana company. The character’s death, despite seemingly ending what could easily be termed as the

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281 “As she is, in any case, sentenced to dependency, rather than obeying a tyrant – parent, husband, protector – she prefers to serve a god; she chooses to fervently desire her enslavement, making it appear as the very expression of her freedom; she strives to overcome her situation as the inessential object by assuming it completely; she engages in an intense exaltation of her loved one through her flesh, her feelings, and her behaviour”.

282 “Fearful love, love which only lives on brutality and abuse, the nervous system being excessively tense and only calming itself under the weight of physical pain, the joy of the brawl, and that hateful tenderness felt towards the man who mistreats you”.

283 “The corpse was beginning to fill the room with its poison”.

surmonter sa situation d’objet inessentiel en l’assumant radicalement;
à travers sa chair, ses sentiments, ses conduites, elle exaltera
souverainement l’aimé. (II, 540)
reign of the almighty female sex, in reality reinstates female sexuality as a force which opposes itself to masculinity through the solidarity of the remaining women in the hotel room with Nana's dead body while the men remain outside. Moreover, Nana’s “mask” having come off, the reality of her, as opposed to her appearance, is exposed.

**The Actress**

Nana, as well as being a prostitute, is also a successful actress. Nineteenth-century theatre was “ineluctably an erotic experience” (Berlanstein 134). In both France and Britain, the actress played an ambiguous role in the stimulation of sexual anxieties through her participation in what Lenard Berlanstein terms the “erotic culture of the stage” (134). The extreme expression of highly sexualised femininity, in *Nana* the prostitute is seen, through her association with the figure of the actress, as a fake creation having the sole objective of ensnaring her male victim. When asked about his theatre, Bordenave, the director, replies with a resolute “dites mon bordel” (Zola, *Nana* 41), thereby highlighting the importance of the juxtaposition of these two worlds. Nana is often depicted whilst applying makeup, and this often happens under the watchful eye of a few men. The act of applying makeup, of putting on a mask, as it were, not only takes place in the theatre, and is not only worn on stage, but also in Nana’s “real” life. Nana being an actress and a courtesan, in fact, indicates the character continuously assuming roles for her “public”. As an actress, it is clear from the very beginning of the novel – which,

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284 Tracy Davis writes that, in Britain, “Victorians recognised that acting and whoring were the occupations of self-sufficient women who plied their trade in public places, and [...] believed that actresses’ male colleagues and patrons complicated women’s lifestyles, economic insecurity and night hours with sexual activity” (100). The actress was thus an “offered” body, considered by many to be that of a prostitute.

285 “Call it my brothel”.
furthermore, positions Nana as a “woman-actress” from the start – that her presence on stage is aimed towards the men in the public.\textsuperscript{286} Like the prostitute, the actress was “vilified […] and viewed as a grave threat to the social order” (Berlanstein134).

In the incipit of the novel, the focus is, indeed, on Nana, but through the eyes, voices and impatient expectation of the men in and outside the theatre: “les hommes […] se plantaient devant les affiches” (28), “les hommes tiraient leurs montres” (30)\textsuperscript{287}, and so on. As a courtesan, she also assumes a role with the men she frequents, adapting her character to the man with whom she simulates having a relationship. This, too, positions Nana as a figure who almost exclusively serves the purpose of gratifying the man in question’s needs, “becoming” a bucolic secret lover for Georges, and a devoted, long-suffering housewife for Fontan. De Beauvoir notes that “[l]’épouse, la courtisane mentent en feignant des transports qu’elles n’éprouvent pas” (II, 500).\textsuperscript{288} Nana does not take on these roles with her “lovers”, but for them, in several acts which serve to emphasise female subservience to male needs and desires, not to mention situations which are entirely “orchestrated” by these men. To illustrate this, let us take the example of her relationships with Georges and Fontan: the furtive countryside affair with Georges is only so because of the impossibility for it to be otherwise on his part – he is a young man living with his mother, etc. – and Nana becomes the stereotypical working-class “housewife” due to Fontan’s own inability to offer her anything else.

\textsuperscript{286} In \textit{Daughters of Eve}, Lenard Berlanstein quotes a certain Jules Poignard who, writing in 1889, described the effect of the actress on the male spectator in the following terms: “We consider actresses as women to conquer, to seduce, to take. […] Besides the pleasure that we find in the troubling and radiant nudity of their arms, shoulders, throats, we embrace the vague hope that […] those parts could […] be ours” (107). It is interesting that Zola portrays Nana in the very same way, describing the “rondeur sous la mince tunique”, her “taille pliée”, and “gorge renversée” (40) – “curves under the thin tunic”, “bent waist”, “thrown back bosom”.

\textsuperscript{287} “The men stood in front of the posters”; “the men took out their watches”.

\textsuperscript{288} “The wife and the courtesan lie by simulating emotions they do not feel”.
It is only at the end of the novel that Nana’s dead face, unable to be anything it is not, “ridden with pox and disease which have lain dormant beneath her beguiling beauty” (Stott 159, my italics), is finally able to signify the truth behind the actress. Similarly, Joris-Karl Huysmans’ Marthe is seen by her lover as “la poupée dont il avait entrevu le son sous la couverture de peau rose” (102). This is an idea which is given much importance in Huysmans’s novel, notably through the character of Léo, who is also described watching Marthe, at first thinking she is different from other women, but later finding that her very gestures and habits betray, in his mind, the likeness she has with all the other women he has known, making her “comme toutes” (60, 61, this idea is repeated). Countess Sabine is equally inscribed within the binary opposition of reality and appearance, the men at her house commenting that “Nana avait l’air bonne fille; tandis qu’on ne savait pas avec la comtesse, on aurait dit une chatte qui dormait, les griffes rentrées, les pattes à peine agitées d’un frisson nerveux” (101). The concern with the difference, and very often, the opposition, between a woman’s appearance and her real nature, is a common theme in French literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. Émile Zola’s œuvre is particularly concerned with this. Nana, however, presents a crucial departure from other novels within the Rougon-Macquart cycle in its portrayal of this specific issue. Whilst, as we have seen in the second chapter of this study, the sexual relationship becomes a time for characters such as Renée in La Curée and Thérèse Raquin to reveal their true selves, whether consciously or not, and a medium through which to expose them, Nana overturns this. In this case, Zola chooses to present sexuality and eroticism as deceiving and, in a way, constructed. Through the medium of the

289 “The doll whose straw he had caught a glimpse of beneath the pink-skinned appearance”.
290 “Like the rest of them”.
291 “Nana seemed like a good girl; whilst one was not sure of the Countess, she resembled a sleeping cat, its claws hidden, its legs slightly agitated by a nervous shudder”.

characterisation of a prostitute, Zola is able to convey not the liberating and fulfilling role of female sexuality, but the forced and ultimately false side of it. Through intimacy, woman does not reveal, but conceals herself even further from man.

_The Mirror and Self-Love as Sexual Subjectivity_

I will now examine one of the most famous passages in Zola’s novel, in which Nana looks at herself in the mirror in front of Muffat, and will do so in comparison with several passages from Maupassant’s _Notre Coeur_, in order to shed light on the significance of the mirror and its relation with the representation of female sexuality. De Beauvoir recognises the significance of the mirror as a vehicle for a woman’s shift in the perception of herself:

> En vérité, il n’est pas possible d’être *pour soi* positivement _autre_, et de se saisir [...] comme objet. [...] Mais, tout au long de sa vie, la femme sera puissamment aidée dans son effort pour se quitter et se rejoindre par la magie du miroir. [...] [L]a femme se sachant, se faisant objet croit vraiment _se voir_ dans la glace: passif et donné, le reflet est comme elle-même une chose; et comme elle convoite la chair féminine, sa chair, elle anime de son admiration, de son désir, les vertus inertes qu’elle aperçoit. (II, 520-1)\(^292\)

\(^{292}\)“In truth, it is not possible to be positively another for oneself, and to see oneself as an object. [...] But, during her lifetime, woman will be aided in her effort to leave and rejoin herself by the magic of the mirror. [...] Woman, knowing and making herself into an object, truly believes that she sees _herself_ in the mirror: passive and offered, the reflection is, like herself, a thing; and as she covets the female flesh, her flesh, she animates the inanimate virtues she sees with her admiration and her desire.”
The passage in Zola’s novel is closely connected with Edouard Manet’s *Nana* (1877, see fig. 12) and *Devant la Glace* (1876, see fig. 13).293

These images have been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Fig. 12. Édouard Manet. *Nana*. 1877. Oil on canvas.
Fig. 13. Édouard Manet. *Devant la Glace*. 1876. Oil on canvas.

It lingers on lengthy descriptions of Nana’s body and her observation of herself, as she is watched by Muffat. In it, Zola provides a wonderful analysis of the female character’s view of herself as a sexual being, as the reader is given insight into her own thoughts about her body, as well as Muffat’s impressions. First of all, it is important to note the significance of Zola’s choice to depict a scene with clear connotations of female masturbation. In the nineteenth century,

the belief in the greater vulnerability of women to nervous illness overlapped concerns about the effects of “self abuse” on women.

Masturbation exacerbated nervousness in women, undermining their desire to reproduce. Doctors advised rest and health spas, [and] a number also advocated extreme surgical measures, such as clitoridectomies, to stop female masturbation. (Garton 111)

The act of masturbating was generally considered as dangerous and degenerate for both sexes, but the anxiety surrounding it was heightened in the case of women. The ideal of the passionless, pure woman clashed with the image of the desiring woman,

293 There is speculation as to what the relationship between Manet’s painting and Zola’s heroine is. In *Manet Manette*, Carol Armstrong writes that Huysmans “tied the painting specifically to Zola’s writing [...] – to the Nana who already existed in *L’Assommoir*, but also the Nana of the eponymous novel [...] published in 1880. [...] In his view, as a member of Zola’s cenacle, it was very definitely a picture of Zola’s ‘heroine.’ [...] [G]iving advance notice of what Zola had in mind next, the painting was a literary *annonce* as much as a boutique commercial. However, since [...] the earliest notes Zola appears to have made on the subject of his new novel date from the summer of 1878, the current of influence must have run both ways: Zola’s Nana must have been suggested at least in part by Manet’s” (230). Furthermore, the earlier *Devant la Glace* is also relevant here, as it seems to represent the very same woman and scene from *Nana* from a different angle, the only difference being the size of the mirror.
and even more so with the idea of a woman pleasuring *herself*. In an article on Havelock Ellis, Paul A. Robinson notes that

most of the examples he discussed involved female subjects, and he explicitly stated that adult masturbation was considerably more frequent in women than in men. In one sense this contention served to undermine the nineteenth-century belief that women lacked sexual feeling. (38)

Nana is not only touching herself in front of the mirror, she is doing so in front of a man, openly displaying her lack of need for masculine “assistance”, and is a prostitute, that most dangerous and feared embodiment of unrestrained female sexuality.

Zola involves the reader in the observation of Nana’s naked body, which takes the form of an almost filmic description, moving from the general to the specific, and vice-versa. Whilst Richard-Laurent Barnett contends that Nana is “no less polarised, victimised and suffocated by the stuff that she is – which she embraces, envelops, incorporates, than the mesmerised males whom she convulsively dismantles” (98), I believe that her fascination with herself is a much more complex affair. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey calls the erotic exhibition of the female character her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”, arguing that

women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: […] she […] plays to and signifies male desire. (2186)
Although her essay deals specifically with cinema, Mulvey’s theory on the male gaze provides an appropriate framework for the analysis of Nana and the mirror. Throughout Zola’s novel, in fact, Nana is constructed as a spectacle to be seen and admired: it is no coincidence that her first “appearance” is on stage, after both the audience and the reader’s curiosities have been tantalised with multiple rumours about her. As Mulvey notes, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure” (2186), and nowhere is this more obvious than in the novel’s incipit, in which the tension to see Nana builds up for the theatre’s spectators as well as the reader. De Beauvoir argues that, “mieux que dans les miroirs, c’est dans les yeux admiratifs d’autrui qu’elle aperçoit son double nimbé de gloire” (II, 529). Nana is, of course, aroused by the thought of what the other, whether it be a man or a woman, known or unknown, sees, and part of her fascination does indeed come from this. Likewise, in Notre Cœur, Mme de Burne admittedly enjoys a man’s admiration:

On lui plaisait surtout en la trouvant incomparable. Sachant fort bien qu’on ne réussit pas sans peine, elle mettait tous ses soins à séduire, et ne trouvait rien de plus agréable que savourer l’hommage du regard qui s’attendrit et du cœur, ce muscle violent, qu’on fait battre par un mot. (429)

I do feel, however, that attributing greater importance to the satisfaction derived from the other’s gaze would signify the alienation of both Nana and Mme de Burne from

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294 “It is in the eyes of the other, rather than in mirrors, that she can better glimpse her double in a glorious halo”. 
295 “It was especially in finding her incomparable that one was liked. Knowing well enough that one does not succeed without trying, she would put the utmost effort towards seducing, and found nothing more pleasant than savouring the tribute of a look that becomes tender, and of the heart, that violent muscle, that can beat for a word”. 
themselves. Looking at herself in the mirror, Nana is not concerned with Muffat observing her, and this enables her to see herself as a sexual object. Mme de Burne sees her admirers as “tous pareils, pauvres êtres qu’elle dominait de son pouvoir séducteur” (412), but feels empowered and gratified by her own admiration of herself.

De Beauvoir maintains that “[t]out amour réclame la dualité d’un sujet et d’un objet. […] Si elle peut ainsi se proposer à ses propres désirs, c’est que depuis l’enfance elle s’est apparue comme un objet” (II, 519-20, italics in original). The female character is, however, not merely objectifying herself, but, more significantly, presenting herself (as object) to herself (as subject). This duality is explicitly rendered in a description which does not merely depict Nana and her reflection, but mentions “the other Nana”: “elle allongea les lèvres, elle se baisa longuement pres de l’aisselle, en riant à l’autre Nana, qui, elle aussi, se baisait dans la glace” (237, my italics).

Interestingly, this scene resembles very closely a mirror scene in Maupassant’s novel, in which Mme de Burne’s words to herself become a dialogue with her reflection. “Elle dit à son image qui lui souriait toujours (et son image, dans la triple glace, remua les lèvres pour répeter): ‘Nous allons bien voir’” (466). Here, as in Nana, the image in the mirror does not reflect, but repeat, her words, suggesting a delay in time, and intensifying the imagery of the double. The act of looking at themselves in the mirror, and of acknowledging the presence of their own reflection, confers a duality to Nana and Mme de Burne that not only enables them to understand the complexities of sexual relationships within themselves, but to reclaim

296 “All the same, poor beings she dominated with her seductive power”.
297 “Every love story requires the duality of a subject and an object. […] If she can thus see herself with desiring eyes, it is because, since she was a child, she has seen herself as an object”.
298 “She brought her lips closer and kissed herself at length under the arm, giggling at the other Nana, who was also kissing herself in the mirror”.
299 “She said to her image, who was still smiling at her (and her image, in the triple mirror, moved her lips to repeat): we shall see”.
their own body as a site for visual and physical pleasure. The descriptions in both Zola and Maupassant’s novels give their characters an almost narcissistic undertone. Mme de Burne admires herself “comme elle se regardait toujours, avec ce contentement qu’on éprouve en rencontrant la personne la plus aimée” (1901). Similarly, Nana becomes enraptured in a “passion de son corps, un ravissement […] qui la tenait sérieuse, attentive, absorbée dans un amour d’elle-même. […] Ce n’était pas pour les autres, c’était pour elle” (234, my italics). The love of their own bodies reaffirms both characters’ subjectivity and independence. De Beauvoir stresses the role of a woman’s puberty in the revelation of her own body to herself as desirable, enabling her to contemplate it with the eyes of a lover (II, 520). The following passages illustrate the shift in perspective:

Elle alla vers la glace, […] se fit un petit salut, un petit sourire, un petit coup de tête ami qui disait: “Très jolie, très jolie”. Elle inspecta ses yeux, se montra ses dents, leva ses bras, posa ses mains sur ses hanches et se tourna de profil pour se bien apercevoir tout entière dans les trois miroirs […]. Alors elle resta debout, amoureusement, en face d’elle-même, enveloppée par le triple reflet de son être, qu’elle trouvait charmant, ravie de se voir, saisie d’un plaisir égoïste et physique devant sa beauté, et la savourant avec une satisfaction de tendresse presque aussi sensuelle que celle des hommes.

(Notre Cœur 452 my italics)
Here, the reader witnesses a change in the way Mme de Burne sees herself. The description moves from her inspecting her eyes and her teeth, to what appears as an almost sudden discovery of her womanly attributes: her hips, and the silhouette of her body, which she turns to admire more closely. Mme de Burne is thus seduced by her vision of herself, and the mirror plays a central role in this discovery of her body as sexually desirable, a discovery bearing a striking resemblance to the one experienced by young women during puberty described by de Beauvoir. In the following passage from *Nana*, Zola’s heroine exemplifies the revelation of the desirability of her body in an even stronger manner. Zola explicitly depicts the surprise she feels upon (re)discovering her seductive attributes, and portrays her attitude as that which a woman might have with a lover:

Nana s'était absorbée dans son ravissement d’elle-même. […] Ça la surprenait toujours de se voir; elle avait l’air étonné et séduit d’une jeune fille qui découvre sa puberté. Lentement, elle ouvrit les bras pour déveloper son torse de Vénus grasse, elle ploya la taille, s’examinant de dos et de face, s’arrêtant au profil de sa gorge, aux rondeurs fuyantes de ses cuisses. […] Un bras derrière la nuque, une main prise dans l’autre, elle renversait la tête, les coudes écartés. […] [S]es yeux demi-clos, sa bouche entrouverte, son visage noyé d’un *rire amoureux.*

(*Nana* 236, my italics)303

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303 “Nana was absorbed in a rapture with herself. […] Seeing herself always surprised her; she had the stunned, seduced look of a young girl who discovers her puberty. Slowly, she opened her arms to bring out her round Venus’s chest, she bent her waist, examining herself from the front and the back, paying attention to the profile of her breasts, and the evasive fullness of her thighs. […] An arm on the nape of her neck, one hand holding the other, she tilted her head back, her elbows outstretched. […] Her eyes half-closed, her lips parted, her face overwhelmed by a loving laughter.”
Nana does not merely appreciate her seductive attributes, but goes further in the way she is seduced / seduces herself. The parallelism with the decisive moment of puberty is explicit here, and is reinforced by Nana’s impulse to accentuate her womanliness further, as she brings out her chest, offers her mouth as if to be kissed, and giggles knowingly. As de Beauvoir notes, “il arrive que, dans le plaisir solitaire, la femme se dédouble en un sujet mâle et un sujet femelle” (II, 520). It is through this dédoublement, and the sensual pleasure that is derived from seeing herself in the mirror, that the female character is able to experience a full sexual subjectivity, that is independent in the most absolute form.

*Eroticism and Love*

When considering the implications of these literary representations of female prostitution on the overall theme of female sexuality, eroticism and desire, a recurring motif which Zola, Huysmans and Goncourt give great importance to is that of the aversion and disgust towards sex on the part of the prostitute. This is of great significance to the representation of sexuality and desire, the first having here been redefined as work instead of pleasure, for these characters “pour qui l’amour n’est qu’un métier, un moyen d’obtenir le luxe” (Krakowski 200). Zola, Goncourt and Huysmans are all depicting women who exploit their position in the only way which is available to them within the socio-sexual economy of their time. These are ideas that are reformulated both by Elisa and Marthe. In Goncourt’s novel, the prostitute’s sexuality is diametrically opposed to the nobler feeling of love, going so far as to expose an incompatibility, in the mind of the main character, of the two – an

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304 “Sometimes, during solitary pleasure, the woman divides herself into both a male and a female subject”.
305 “For whom love is no more than a job, a way of obtaining luxury”.
incompatibility which, will, furthermore, lead to her brutal murdering of the man she loves:

chez cette femme ayant, par moments, le vomissement de l'amour physique, c'était un supplice de se livrer au “petit homme chéri”, ainsi qu'aux passants auxquels elle se vendait, de lui apporter dans l'acte charnel les restes de tous, de le salir [...] de la publicité de son contact (Goncourt 104)\textsuperscript{306}

On the other hand, sexuality is very often referred to as “love” in these texts. The substitution of the concept of sexuality by that of a “higher”, more “civilised” feeling, love, seems to permeate fictional renditions of eroticism and desire both in France and in Britain in the period from 1850 to 1900. In the case of British New Woman literature, as seen in the first chapter, the need to “legitimise”, as it were, nascent female sexuality is justifiable, due to various factors – the Bildungsroman quality of novels such as Ménie Muriel Dowie’s Gallia, for example, or a heroine’s rationality demanding an explanation for her budding desire. In the case of fictional representations of prostitution, however, the overlapping of the idea of sex, and that of love, seems irreconciliable. Nana is a character who, throughout the novel, often tries to emulate the “higher” classes. She often uses the word “amour” when what she means and is referring to is not love, but sex. In 1881, only a year after the publication of Nana, Émile Zola condemns his contemporary society’s hypocrisy:

Notre siècle a une longue éducation de pudeur, qui le rend d’autant plus hypocrite que ses vices se sont civilisés davantage. On fait la chose, mais on n’en rit plus ; on en rougit et on se cache. La morale ayant été mise à dissimuler le sexe, on a déclaré le sexe infâme. Il

\textsuperscript{306} “for this woman, who thought of physical love as nauseating, it was a torture to offer herself to her “dear little man”, just as she sold herself to strangers, and to sully him, in the act, with the remaining traces of others, with the public nature of her contact”.
s’est ainsi formé une bonne tenue publique, des convenances, toute
une police sociale qui s’est substituée à l’idée de vertu. Cette évolution
a procédé par le silence : il est des choses dont il est devenu peu à
peu inconvenant de parler. (“Littérature et Moralité” 111)\(^{307}\)

The writer’s distressed remarks about the need to move within certain “thematical
boundaries” are what obviously necessitated a solution, and this was to substitute
what was considered offensive with what, on the contrary, was deemed acceptable.
As Michel Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, “il se peut bien qu’on ait codifié
toute une rhétorique de l’allusion et de la métaphore. De nouvelles règles de
décence, sans aucun doute, ont filtré les mots: police des énoncés” (26).\(^{308}\)

Huysmans condemns the prostitute’s sexuality in a very hard, direct manner,
describing it as “cette abdication d’elle-même, [...] cette geôle infrangible, [...] cet
odieux métier qui n’admettait ni répugnance, ni lassitude” (Huysmans 34).\(^{309}\) These
passages are interesting as they provide an insight into the meaning of sexuality
within prostitution, and, more importantly, shed light on the intrinsic differences
between sexuality and desire. Moreover, Goncourt’s *La Fille Elisa* provides the
reader with many reflections on the role of an “excessive”, or perhaps “premature”,
sexuality, on the development of a need for love in the prostitute, describing Elisa as
feeling “un dévouement prêt à jaillir, depuis des mois, au profit du premier passant”

\(^{307}\) “Our century has, for a long time, been educated into prudishness, which renders it all the more
hypocritical, as its vices become more civilised. The act is consumed, but one no longer jokes about
it; we blush and hide. The dissimulation of sexuality being the ultimate goal of morals, sex has been
declared to be despicable. The idea of good public manners, rules, and a social policing which has
replaced the idea of virtue have thus emerged. This evolution’s common practice is one of silence:
there are things about which it has become, little by little, disadvantageous to talk about”.

\(^{308}\) lit may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified. Without
question, new rules of propriety screened out some words: there was a policing of statements” (Trans.
Hurley 17-8).

\(^{309}\) “This abdication of herself, [...] this unbreakable slammer, [...] this hateful work which does not
admit repugnance or tiredness”.
The need to substitute one word for another leads to what could be much more dangerous ground: the misunderstanding that causes the substitution of one idea for another. Love thus becomes a sublimation of the sexual act, as I have noted, but, even more significantly here, of the baser reality of prostitution. By aligning the need to sell her body with the purer, exculpating feeling of love, the prostitute feels that she has removed herself from her condition as object and turned into the desiring, subjective femme amoureuse.

**Conclusion**

Having compared the representation of prostitution in a selection of French and British texts, the main difference which has emerged, as in earlier chapters in my work, has been that of a stronger aesthetisation of the subject on the part of the French authors, which is again due to the differences between male and female writers. Sarah Grand epitomises the more sociological representation of the very same issues which had already become apparent in other New Woman texts. While the difference is extremely pronounced, I believe that, in the case of the different authors’ concern with the theme of prostitution, the use of the erotic as a vehicle for social analysis is what brings these works together. By examining, albeit briefly, the historical context, as well as Rossetti’s “Jenny” as a literary predecessor to these fictions of prostitution, the masculine agent clearly emerges as the primary focus of these fictions. Whilst previous chapters demonstrated the possibility of a female sexual awakening and sexuality as independent from the masculine, the prostitute’s dependence on male demand often precludes such autonomy. “Encased”, as it were, between the idea of the “respectable woman” and that of the prostitute, it is

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310 “A devotion ready to gush out, for months already, towards the first man to cross her path”.
man – whether he is a character, writer, poet, or painter – who in effect manipulates and shapes the fictional rendition of the prostitute. It seems to me that it is precisely because of this centrality of the masculine to the very idea of female prostitution that male authors, such as Zola, Huysmans, Goncourt, and even Rossetti, are able to convey a more in-depth, socially and personally invested examination of the female prostitute.
Chapter Four | “Un Air de Reine Cruelle”: Sex, Power, Anxiety and Subjectivity in Fantastic Fiction | Vernon Lee, Sarah Grand, Guy de Maupassant, and Émile Zola

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Fig. 14. Unknown. Das neue Strahlen. 1896. Ink on paper.

The drawing Das neue Strahlen, which appeared in an 1896 edition of the late-nineteenth-century avant-garde German art magazine Jugend, depicts a mysterious young woman, dressed in fashionable contemporary clothing, who is putting on a mask. The most striking feature of the image is that we can see her bones, and her “heart”, as if on an X-Ray, through her dress. The heart seems to ascribe very conventional connotations to the woman: when we see this shape, we are reminded of love, of kindness, of tender emotions. However, this heart is at odds with the mask she is putting on: why is she hiding? What, or who, is she hiding from? Is the unknown author of the picture trying to say something about the deceitful nature of women? Or is this yet another expression of the unknowability of women? Her visible skeleton seems to prefigure her death, yet also seems to suggest that, under her mask, she is already dead, and dangerous.

In this chapter, I will consider female sexuality in the supernatural short stories of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), Grand, Maupassant and Zola. The previous chapters focused on realist and naturalist literature, and this final chapter’s emphasis on fantastic pieces represents a clear departure from such fiction. Allowing its authors to move away from the constraints of scientific fact, the tenets of realism, or the

311 “Every myth involves the projection of a subject’s hopes and fears.”
demands of the eugenic project, for example, the fantastic, as I shall demonstrate, was a genre which opened up new, freer, more imaginative possibilities for fin-de-siècle fiction to develop. The fantastic provided a space within which it was possible to explore new themes, which could sometimes not be adequately treated in a realistic manner (Ruddick 205) during the final decades of the century. As we shall see, far from moving away from their concerns, the authors that form the focus of this chapter found in this mode of writing a playground to express some of the same ideas in novel ways.

Lee was a prolific short story writer, and differentiated herself from other New Woman authors in her use of the fantastic, which, as Wendell Harris noted, gave “new dimensions to [her] fiction” (10). She was also a follower of Walter Pater, and wrote profusely on aesthetics, travel, and Renaissance Italy. In 1890, she published four short stories, some of which had previously appeared in magazines, in *Hauntings*. Grand’s “The Undefinable” (1894) is not considered a supernatural story, yet, as will become apparent in my analyses, fits in quite nicely with the fantastic fiction I examine here. I wish to set Lee and Grand’s stories against four fantastic pieces by Maupassant, and one short story by Zola. Maupassant was, as I have said before, an avid writer of short fiction, both of the realist and fantastic genres. In his seminal text on the French *conte fantastique*, Pierre-Georges Castex devotes his final chapter to Maupassant, describing the fantastic as “le genre littéraire auquel il doit sa gloire” (368). Throughout his career, his work was published in such renowned papers as the *Gil Blas*, the *Echo de Paris*, or *Le Figaro*, to name but a few. Richard Fusco points to the fact that the “form itself had damaged his reputation” (1), yet he continued to write in this manner throughout his career. The

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312 “The literary genre to which he owes his fame”.
influences on his short writing were numerous, Fusco citing Poe and Turgenev as the most significant (9). Émile Zola, on the other hand, is not generally remembered for his short fiction, although he did write several short stories. As Michelle E. Bloom warns the reader in an article on Zola’s fantastic fiction, there is a danger of seeing his short pieces as dependent or secondary to the larger project of the Rougon-Macquart cycle (“Zola Fantastique” 206-7). “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” (1882) is not a fantastic short story per se, yet, as I shall demonstrate, many of the themes, images and concerns in it mirror those of the fantastic pieces this chapter considers, and I have therefore chosen to include it here. Michelle E. Bloom notes that “Zola […] never entirely abandons the imagination despite his theories” (“The Aesthetics of Guilt” 37), and this short piece in particular illustrates this idea. I will begin with a short overview of the short story and the fantastic mode in the late-nineteenth century, and will then analyse the depiction of female sexuality from a number of perspectives, arising from the stories’ plots.

The Short Story and the Fantastic

In his review of the eighteen nineties, Holbrook Jackson referred to the emerging writers of short stories in England as “jewels drawn from a bag” (278). Indeed, the nineteenth century saw the flourishing of the short story as a popular literary form throughout Europe. One significant factor to the propulsion of this form in England was the decline of the three-volume Victorian novel. As Jackson noted, this decline was far more than a mere change in publication style: it signalled the demise of “the old sentimental lending-library novel of polite romantic atmosphere and crudely happy endings” (H. Jackson 264). The appearance of the realist movement during the nineteenth century entailed the short story’s evolution as a
parallel, briefer, version of the realist novels which were being published then.

Alongside these new, briefer novels, short stories entered the scene, capturing, “with their fragmented nature, their open-endedness, the spirit of the age” (Richardson, *Women Who Did* xlvi). An increasing number of such pieces were being published in highly regarded magazines, their burgeoning popularity creating an ever-growing demand for such fiction. Placing emphasis on its episodic nature, “the aesthetic value of compression in the short story [constituted] one of the discoveries of the 1890’s” (W. Harris, “John Lane’s Keynotes Series” 1409). These fragmentary fictions constitute veritable “slices of life,” and with brevity came a newfound freedom to treat specific subjects much more concisely, and, therefore, acutely.

“The new woman threatened to live her own life” (H. Jackson 33), and the assertive, modern young woman of the fin de siècle grew alongside the increasing popularity of the short story. Issues which had hitherto been avoided became prominent topics, and “women and sexual relations [were placed] at the heart of the ‘nineties short story” (Stubbs 106). New Women took the short story as an occasion to turn “inward to sensation and feeling” (L. Marcus 145). Perhaps unfortunately, though, the New Woman was associated with that other fin-de-siècle “character”, the

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313 Since its rise during the nineteenth century, the short story has attracted, and continues to attract, much critical attention. Charles Edward May’s (Ed.) *The New Short Story Theories*, and Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey’s (Eds.) *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* are two collections addressing numerous debates concerning the defining features of the short story.

314 In 1846, Edgar Allan Poe published “The Philosophy of Composition,” which many consider to be the first critical appraisal of the short story as a literary form. This essay would ultimately cement the short story’s presence within the literary debate through its discussion of the form’s inherent need for what he termed the “unity of effect or impression” (n.p.). This stylistic and structural device consists in bringing forth all the elements of a story and using them to serve the central effect, or idea, which will give its totality to the piece. Poe’s theory placed a great emphasis on the ending of the story, due to the significance of causality and of repercussion in short pieces of fiction. His ideas opposed themselves to the traditional motions found within more conservative modes of writing. In *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928), Russian formalist Vladimir Propp broke down the different stages of these more conventional tales. Some major characteristics of this kind of narrative include an extremely linear progression of the narrated events, and a very constructed approach to characterisation, in which the characters are not varying elements, but become archetypes of certain values, as well as a climax at the very end of the tale. The short story presented a lucid break from those more traditional patterns of narrative.
decadent. The current of New Woman literature thus found itself associated with the decadent movement itself, as “decadence did service throughout the eighteen-nineties as a word by which one could designate whatever currents in the literature of the time seemed new, strange, disquieting, or immoral” (W. Harris, “Identifying the Decadent Fiction of the 1890s” 1). If one considers Richard Le Gallienne’s definition of the decadent as a “concentration of isolated fragments of experience” (W. Harris, “Identifying the Decadent Fiction of the 1890s” 2), then the New Woman short story, as well as French short fiction, were certainly decadent in that respect. New Woman fiction was “generally characterised by a sexual candour which was also a feature of literary decadence” (25), leading some critics to deplore its introspection within the female character and her sexuality. The publication of stories in such renowned magazines as *The Yellow Book* or *The Savoy* meant that these women writers not only gained more notoriety than if they had been publishing longer, more expensive novels, but also that the very brevity required by the genre allowed them to put forth their views and pose the questions arising from these in a more succinct, and therefore more direct, manner.

In France, one of the most important studies on the fantastic is Pierre-Georges Castex’s *Le Conte Fantastique en France, de Nodier à Maupassant*. In it, Castex traces the development of the fantastic tradition in France, attributing its origins to the German author Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann (1776–1822). Castex writes extensively on the relationship of the fantastic to the real. He argues that, in the nineteenth century, the “illusion devient de plus en plus difficile à créer parce que le public devient de moins en moins naïf: les [lecteurs] du dix-neuvième siècle n’accordent plus de crédit aux fables qui, jadis, charmaient leurs ancêtres”
This connection to the real is essential to the nineteenth-century fantastic, characterised as it is by “une intrusion brutale du mystère dans le cadre de la vie réelle” (Castex 8). Similarly, Louis Vax describes the genre’s “rupture des constantes du monde réel” (5), while Roger Caillois highlights its “rupture de l’ordre reconnu” (10). It is therefore necessary for the stories to be grounded in a reality which its readers can recognise.

One of my main concerns in this chapter is to show how, and why, the fantastic short stories by Vernon Lee, Sarah Grand, Guy de Maupassant and Émile Zola succeed in their treatment of issues surrounding female sexuality. What are the particularities of these fantastic pieces, and what does the fantastic allow that the novel, or the realist/naturalist mode do not? What did the genre’s simultaneous grounding in and rupture with reality enable these fictions to portray? Interestingly, contemporary readers of such fiction might have sought the very same answers. In his article on fin-de-siècle fantastic fiction, Nicholas Ruddick points out that

Perhaps surprisingly, given the contemporary prestige of both positivism as a philosophical perspective and realism as a fictional mode, most reviewers were not opposed in principle to what Julian Hawthorne in an 1890 review of Dorian Gray referred to as “The Romance of the Impossible”. Less concerned than we are to place fantastic fiction in subgeneric categories, they were more interested in the issue of how, in the new scientific age, a fantastic scenario might effectively express a universal truth. (Ruddick 202)

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315 “Illusion becomes increasingly difficult to create because the public becomes progressively less naïve: nineteenth-century readers no longer believe in the fables which once charmed their ancestors”.
316 “A brutal intrusion of the mysterious in the setting of real life”.
317 “Rupture of the permanent features of the real world”.
318 “Rupture of the known order”.

The use of the fantastic to pose questions about and seek answers to contemporary issues is similar to the idea expressed by Talia Schaffer in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, in which she argues that “as long as women were writing in a pretty style, readers might not notice what they were actually describing” (5). For Lyn Pykett, New Woman writing was an attempt “to appropriate and transform the subject-matter and styles of fiction and to extend the possibilities of particular genres beyond their culturally ascribed limits” (207). One of the elements that bring together these pieces is the usage of the female character as a central element of the fantastic.

*The Female “Subject of Art”*

Sondeep Kandola maintains that Lee’s stories depict “the failure of a ‘radical’ masculine impressionism to incarcerate conclusively the female subject” (Kandola 26). However, it is not only the failure to “incarcerate” successfully the subject that is significant here, but the attempt to do so by “objectifying her self for his own art” (Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization* 68). Both the British and French stories present recurring plotlines of male artists and female “models”, creating discourses that question the objectifying of women, not merely in art, but in life.

Lee’s “Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover” (1886, 1890) is narrated by a man remembering a summer during which he was commissioned to paint the portrait of Mr and Mrs Oke of Okehurst. The painter finds himself increasingly fascinated by this woman, not least because of her habit of wearing seventeenth-century clothes, and her uncanny resemblance to an ancestor of hers whose portrait can be admired in one of the house’s many halls. As the summer progresses, the tension between husband and wife becomes progressively more palpable to the
observer. The painter finds out about a legend concerning Mr and Mrs Oke’s ancestors from the seventeenth century, who had murdered the woman’s lover, a poet called Lovelock. There is a yellow drawing-room in the house that is said to make the members of the Oke family uncomfortable, as, according to some sort of prophecy, childless descendants of the family will die in that very room, and end the Oke family. While Mr Oke cannot bear to be in the mysterious room, Alice Oke spends most of her time there. The painter finds out that she believes herself to be the reincarnation of the seventeenth-century Alice, and that she longs to be reunited with Lovelock. Over time, the tension mounts between the couple, culminating in Mr Oke murdering his wife and killing himself in the yellow room. The story’s painter-narrator never does finish his portrait of Mrs. Oke, constantly sketching, yet never finding the best way to portray her, just as he never fully understands her as a person. Patricia Pulham calls attention to the fact that “a portrait does exist, a portrait which is the uncanny double of Alice Oke” (128). This is not the portrait painted by the commissioned painter, nor is it one that both he and her husband accept as a rendering of the nineteenth-century Alice, exemplifying the contrast between man as observer of woman and a woman’s own image of herself. In fact, “when the nineteenth-century Alice looks at the portrait of the seventeenth-century Alice, what she sees is a satisfying [...] reflection that affirms her existence and her identity” (Pulham 131, my italics). The painter’s sketches, his failed attempts at understanding Alice, thus oppose themselves to the finished painting which she herself identifies with. This painting is a pre-existing depiction of her, in a way, and, as such, invalidates his creation of his own image of her.

The story itself is framed by a short dedicatory note from Lee herself to a Count Peter Boutourline, a Russian writer and friend of hers, in which she recalls
telling him the story of “Oke” one evening they spent together. In her dedication, Lee insists that the writing of such events may exorcise the magic and mystery of the story, or as she puts it, “that printer’s ink chases away the ghosts that may pleasantly haunt us, as efficaciously as gallons of holy water” (105). What we have here is thus a “double-framing” of Alice’s story: the painter trying to paint her, and Lee reluctantly writing about her. The dedication illuminates the theme of (attempted, failed) creation even further, not only through Lee’s fear that writing it will de-mystify it, but also through her disapproval of the effect of the “printer’s ink”. As a woman writing about a man trying to paint a woman, Lee’s message becomes ambiguous. Can her preference for the mysterious story be paralleled by a desire to keep the woman a mystery? Ultimately, the interest of the story does not lie in Lee’s preservation of the “female mystique”, in de Beauvoir’s terms, but, rather, in the story’s use of the theme of artistry to denounce a man’s (or man’s) attempt to capture a non-existing “essence” of woman. This very idea is also present, albeit to a lesser extent, in “Amour Dure”, where Spiridon, a scholar travelling around Italy, researches about the life of a woman of the fifteenth century called Medea da Carpi. In this story, the man’s only way of “seeing” her is precisely in two old portraits that he finds.

The theme of the portrait is equally prominent in Zola’s “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”, written only four years before Lee’s “Oke”. During the first part of the story, Zola presents its main character, Julien, as a morose and solitary character, highlighting drawing as one of the few activities he indulges in. The subject he draws, however, is “toujours la même tête, une femme de profil, l’air sévère, avec de larges bandeaux et une torsade de perles dans le chignon” (17). Although the painter in “Oke”’s sketches of Alice portrays her in different poses, both his and

319 “Always the same head, a woman in profile, with a severe expression, and large bandeaux as well as a string of pearls in her hair.”
Julien’s fixation with a single subject reveal their need to return, again and again, to that which they cannot, and have not, mastered. In the case of Julien, the repetition of the same perspective of his imaginary model also denotes his will to imprison the subject within a single pose, enabling him to control and create her to his own liking. Framed by her window, Thérèse’s first appearance quickly supplants Julien’s drawing(s). For Naomi Schor, the window in Zola’s œuvre is a neuralgic point where Zola’s aesthetic, sexual and political concerns intersect. [...] Those who occupy the privileged position run the gamut from the artist-seer to the sadist-voyeur. But the window is endowed with yet another meaning; the theme of the voyeur leads us inevitably to the problem of enclosure. For the window exists in space, and in its everyday function acts as a tie between a closed interior space and an open exterior space. (“From Window to Window” 47-8)

In this story, the focus is very much on the tension between Julien’s interior and Thérèse’s, which he perceives as impenetrable. Captivated by her daily appearances, the sound of the window closing terrifies him (33). Julien’s voyeuristic observation takes this tension further as he spectacularises Thérèse, Zola emphasising this through his use of light. As she appears, the room is “vivement éclairée dans la façade sombre” (22), while Julien extinguishes his candle (24).

The window-painting becomes a stage, with Thérèse as the heroine of the play. Yet,

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320 The physical distance which separates the two characters emphasises sexual difference. As John C. Lapp states in “The Watcher Betrayed and the Fatal Woman”, “the observer, like the spectator in a tragic play, is helpless before the action that unfolds in front of him, action of which the ultimate symbol is the unbridgeable gap between the sexes” (278). The construction of the character of Thérèse through the adoring eyes of Julien is, perhaps rather surprisingly, due to the length of the work, and to its relative omission from most criticism written on Zola, one of the most interesting representations of female sexuality within the author’s œuvre. Maupassant’s “L’Inconnue” develops the idea of the “woman at a distance” even further through the woman’s more mobile nature: she roams the streets of Paris, where the narrator sometimes sees her, and enters buildings without his knowing why. In this sense, the “inconnue”, the stranger, is the ultimate expression of man’s frustrated attempts at grasping woman’s nature.

321 “Strongly lit within the dark façade”. 

this is no ordinary performance, Julien remaining, figuratively as well as literally, in the dark.

Lee’s “Dionea” (1890) presents a slight variation on the theme of the artist and his muse. In it, a sculptor friend of the narrator, Waldemar, visits the fictional Italian town of Montemirto in search for a model for his project of a statue of Venus. Waldemar’s wife convinces him to take Dionea as a model, despite his being initially interested in finding a male model. As his work on the statue progresses, Waldemar becomes increasingly enraptured with Dionea, repeatedly proclaiming her beauty to be far superior to anything he could produce, while his wife becomes more and more jealous. One fateful night, after borrowing an antique altar for Venus from De Rosis, Waldemar asks Dionea to stand on it. His wife, alarmed by the noise she hears, goes into his study. The reader is not told exactly what happens, but the story unfolds tragically, with Waldemar’s wife sacrificed on the altar, the sculptor killing himself, a fire destroying the study, and Dionea’s disappearance. At the end of the story, we are told that she has been seen sailing on a Greek ship. Patricia Pulham considers that “Dionea […] not only refuses the ‘frame’ of art, she exceeds it so completely that she cannot be captured at all” (139). In this story, in fact, Waldemar renounces his ambition to project his model, and in this failure resides Dionea’s own success. By placing her on the altar, he is attempting to, quite literally, petrify her into the statue he cannot make, yet she escapes. The story’s use of the statue can be contrasted with Victoria Cross’s “Theodora”. Here, the (sexual) objectification of woman that runs throughout Cecil’s first-person narration is overturned at the end precisely by Theodora’s use of Cecil’s own objects of art to depict herself as a Venus reigning over him.
These masculine failures to capture their models, or muses, stage “woman who wants autonomy and man who therefore cannot recognise her as a woman or as dependent” (Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization* 68). Grand’s character in “The Undefinable” overturns these plots of female incarceration and uses the male artist’s impulse to frame and define through his own subjectivity against him. In the story, a woman presents herself, unsolicited, at a painter’s house, offering her services as a model. At first, he finds her unattractive, and is unwilling to appoint her, yet he soon begins to feel a strong fascination with this strange woman. Her third and last visit will be the longest one, during which they share a dinner in Ancient Greek garb. He begins painting her, but she leaves abruptly, declaring that she has given him enough to work with. The story ends with the painter desperate to find her, in the knowledge that he will never be able to finish the marvellous portrait of that woman. This story differs from the others in that the artist’s model is such out of her own will, *convincing him* to paint her: “I am here to be painted” (133). The capturing that, in the other stories, arose out of the male impetus and fascination is here wanted by the woman. She takes the time to unveil herself to him as she is, not as he would want her to be, imposing what is repulsive to him at the beginning, defining herself so that he will represent her as she is. The painter is but an instrument for the woman to exhibit herself: “If I could paint myself I should not be here. I should be doing what I want for myself” (Grand 133). In de Beauvoir’s terminology, this signifies that the model’s immanence is overturned, even negated, as she uses *his* artistic capabilities to project *her* transcendent self onto the canvas. The voyeuristic theatre of “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” becomes, in Grand’s story, a play entirely orchestrated by the woman. She makes no attempt to disguise the spectacle she is staging, handing the “actor” his costume, and openly expressing her
enjoyment: “Just to see you [...] gives me little electric shocks all over!” (130). Not only does she elude the typical attitude of the model, but she places him as a model in order for him to better understand her subjective position when he paints her. Thus, she becomes the painter herself, her “perfect abandon to the repose of the moment” (131) as she watches him, mirroring his earlier “solitary satisfaction before a finished picture” (115). Grand’s story thus enables her unnamed female character to be the artist, she directs the “play” of her encounters with the painter, and dictates her own portrait to him. The end of the story, however, is more problematic. While the “model”’s success is clear until then, the painter’s anguish signals an unresolved conflict, as he understands that he must “give [her her] due; and when [he] help[s] [her], [she] will help [him]” (136). Who is the subject, and who is the object? Who is helping whom? Who will manage to “acknowledge all [they] owe to” (136) whom, to use Grand’s own words? There is, for de Beauvoir, a solution: each individual must be prepared to recognise him/herself in the other, each posing, in a reciprocal manner, as both one/subject and other/object (I, 240). Yet she admits that this is no easy endeavour: one is constantly in danger of breaking that balance in the relationship with an other (I, 240). The end of the story thus presents this very unresolved conflict: the real measure of the woman’s success remains undefined.

The male narrators’ attempts to render the women in these texts fixed through a “setting” of woman in art enables a discourse on the nature of woman to be constructed around a strong instantiation of the female character. The “man-narrator”, in fact, strives to construct a fixed, unchangeable image of the “woman-object” both in his telling of his story in the first person and in the attempted “enframing” of the woman within the fixed object of art. The male narrators construct the characters in these stories as abstract concepts, allegories. This is a concept of
evil, for Medea, Dionea, and Thérèse. In the case of Mrs. Oke, it is the concept of an obsession with the past; of pure passion and eroticism, in the case of the unnamed woman whose hair the narrator of “La Chevelure"\(^\text{322}\) falls in love with; and the very epitome of the New Woman, in the case of the model in Grand’s story. Ascribing one predominant characteristic and function to the female character is here “elevated” from a simple requirement or constriction of the short story as a genre, to the basis of an ideological position on the part of the male narrator, which, by extension, offers the writer the possibility to focus on the issues surrounding female sexuality in a very direct way.

De Beauvoir argues that “plus les femmes s’affirment comme êtres humains, plus la merveilleuse qualité de l’Autre meurt en elles” (I, 243)\(^\text{323}\). The male narrators invest themselves in an effort to de-humanise the women in their lives to secure the “otherness” of the loved woman. These attempts manifest themselves, as I have noted, in the male artistic endeavour, but also in the characterisation of ghostly female characters. Maupassant and Lee both present similar, haunting female ghostly figures. In “La Chevelure”, the woman to whom belonged the strand of hair the narrator falls in love with accompanies him everywhere, in a hallucinatory fantasy of madness and desire. In “Amour Dure”, the dead Medea not only haunts Spiridon’s mind, but also materialises as a ghost. The soldier in “Apparition” clearly sees and interacts with his friend’s dead wife. While male-authored ghost stories “tend to be more diagnostic, clinical, journalistic, vested in mensuration” (Dickerson 7), “the act of writing a ghost story was for the popular woman writer the creation of a public discourse for voicing feminine concerns” (Dickerson 6). I feel that Maupassant’s

\(^{322}\) “La Chevelure" (1884) recounts the story of a man who fell in love with a strand of hair which he found hidden in an antique piece of furniture.

\(^{323}\) “The more women affirm themselves as human beings, the more that marvellous quality of the Other disappears”.
fiction cannot be considered clinical, or journalistic: his characters are constantly faced with the experience of madness and doubt. These ghost-women are invariably shown as belonging to another dimension, and the men’s fascination and/or interaction with them is rendered dangerous by its impossibility. While, as ghosts, they are undeniably, supremely, “Other” – they are dead, belong to the past, are trapped in a world in which time does not move – they leave a trace that is intended for the men to recognise their existence and their agency. Medea leaves a letter for Spiridon and lures him to meet her in a world that is her own, an abandoned church which no-one has entered for years. After entering the abandoned house in which not even the dead woman’s husband will go, the soldier in “Apparition” is forced to acknowledge that he has seen a ghost, upon finding her hair rolled around one of his buttons the next day. The dead woman’s hair in “La Chevelure” is also a testament of her being, a trace that has been left by the woman in this world. These women are audacious in their actions, and this audacity guarantees their subjectivity. Furthermore, it is not exclusively the male character who is baffled and terrified by the female presence in these stories. “Oke of Okehurst”, with its ghostly love triangle, has a sort of duality in its manner of observation of the three characters which comprise it. Interestingly, there are two male characters in this triangle, one is alive, and the other one is a ghost. Contrary to “Amour Dure” and “Dionea”, the ghost / fantastical being here is a man, yet the search for meaning and the mystery remain focussed on the character of Mrs. Oke. The fact that both the painter-narrator and her own husband try, yet, albeit in different ways, fail to understand her, however, posits the story within the same questioning of female identity and otherness. The fantastic short story provides a space within which the authors can create myths of femininity which convey very fixed images of female characters, and in doing so
question the idea that “mystère pour l’homme, la femme est regardée comme mystère en soi” (Beauvoir I, 400).³²⁴

In *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide*, Vanessa Dickerson argues that mid-Victorian female-authored supernatural fiction “addressed issues of gendered energies and spirituality, of power and powerlessness, of women’s precarious position on the continuum of materialism and spiritualism, of women’s visibility and invisibility, of what amounts to the in-betweenness of ghosts” (9). This is a definition that can also be applied to fin-de-siècle fantastic stories, and to those by Maupassant and Zola that I consider here, yet there is a point which seems to be open to discussion. What Dickerson terms the “in-betweenness” of ghosts becomes, in eighteen-eighties and -nineties fantasy, and particularly in Lee’s fiction, a very fixed state, due to male narrators who, far from conveying a changeable image of women, seek to define them. This quest for what could be named a “definitive definition” of the female character is twofold. In the first instance, it is the definition which the male narrators seek in their failed attempts to capture women in art. In the second instance, it is the story of the woman and the narrator’s search for meaning and definition as written on the page. Thus, what Patricia Pulham has termed “Lee’s search for alternative female subjectivities in the intermediary space of the supernatural” (Pulham 147) becomes less about multiple subjectivities than about the recognition of a single subjectivity of the female character vis-à-vis the male narrator, which seeks to liberate woman from, in de Beauvoir’s words, the sphere of the relative in which she is trapped (II, 540).

**Masculine Perceptions**

³²⁴ “A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence”.

The characters in the works discussed in this chapter all belong to “a ‘type’ of fictional female who is sexually assertive, a figure who stimulates male sexual anxieties and who brings moral atrophy, degeneration, or even death to the male protagonists” (Stott ix). The emphasis on the threat and mythologising of the female characters in these works and the impact of their sexuality upon the male figures in them reveals the need for a shift in perspective, focussing on the concept of point of view. While, in the previous chapter, I focussed on the reflections on desire and eroticism very much through an in-depth study of the female characters themselves, in this case, the problem of point of view is at the centre of my concerns. All the stories I discuss in this chapter, with the exception of Zola’s “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”, make use of a male narrator. While this is not surprising in the case of a male writer, such as Maupassant, why did Lee and Grand choose to narrate these stories through the eyes of men? In the previous chapter, I noted the importance of the male gaze and its bearing on female sexual subjectivity. In the case of these fantastic stories, the male gaze becomes much more prominent, actually dominating the plot. Does it serve a particular purpose, and how does it compare to Maupassant’s male-authored male narrators?

In their introduction to their work on the *femme fatale*, Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe define this figure as “never quite fully known [...] always beyond definition”, surrounded by a sense of mystery, and of a concealed identity that is “always just beyond the visible surface” (1). While I seek to avoid identifying the characters I consider here as *femmes fatales* strictly speaking, it is, however, necessary to acknowledge the similarity of characteristics they share with this figure. We can begin to focus on the problem of the male narrator by considering de Beauvoir’s conception of the Other. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she writes that “l’Autre est
The “unknowability” of woman, but, even more importantly, the quest for an understanding of her, is one of the key traits of these characters and these works. The fascination they exert on the men who observe them compels these men to speak them. The male narrator’s attempt to dominate the story becomes even more obvious in Grand’s “The Undefinable”, where the narrator goes so far as to negate the totality of the female character’s own statements by interjecting her speech with his own thoughts – “Who can she be?”, “She must belong to a considerable people”, etc. (124).

I will now consider the male narration in Zola’s “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”. This story is divided into four parts, its structure mirroring Julien’s attempt to formulate an opinion and understanding of the woman he has fallen in love with. The first part of the story serves as an introduction to the character of Julien Michon, establishing his habits and personality. The second part of the story is the longest one, taking sixteen pages out of the story’s fifty-one, and depicts Julien’s attraction to Thérèse de Marsanne, his neighbour, whom he sees at her window every day. This section of the story is characterised by phrases such as “Elle gardait une singulière gravité, qui la faisait considérer comme une demoiselle bien élevée” (37), “jamais on ne savait ce qu’elle pensait” (37), presenting the character of Thérèse as seen through popular opinion, but more importantly, through the window, and idealising eyes, of Julien. The third part of the story occurs after Thérèse has flirtingly lured Julien into her bedroom and shown him the corpse of Colombel, her dead lover, whom she has killed. Here, Zola focusses on the relationship between Thérèse and

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325 The Other is singularly defined in the precise way in which the One chooses to position him/herself.
326 She retained a singularly solemn expression, for which she was considered as a young woman who had been brought up well.
327 One never knew what she was thinking.
Colombel. The fourth, and final, part of the story deals with Julien helping Thérèse to get rid of the corpse in exchange for one night with her, and finally drowning in the river before consummating their relationship. The story is thus structured around an attempt to elucidate Thérèse's character. She is presented firstly, as seen through Julien, secondly, as seen through her relationship with Colombel, and lastly, after the murder of the latter, she is deconstructed into pieces which are, in effect, appropriated, if not created, by the two men in her life. The end of the story provides a possibility to reconstruct her as a whole, yet this is also done in relation to these men, as she asks one of them to dispose of the other's dead body. Here, Zola not only allows the character to be unmasked in stages, but, with the death of Colombel and Julien, enables Thérèse to be masked again, and therefore to regain her mysterious, unknowable femininity. As in his novels, Zola uses the "flashback" to explain Thérèse. This story, however, presents a departure from his novelistic flashbacks, as it focusses on her relationship with Colombel, seeing her exclusively through the lens of her bond with a specific man. This results in this third part of the story paralleling not only the way her self is presented through Julien’s enamoured eyes, but also the male narrators in the other stories. The mystery of the *femme fatale* is in fact only so precisely because it is imbued with the male point of view, and, as such, can only be elucidated, or attempted to understand, by the male observer, and told by the male narrator.

As Richardson argues, “offering up snapshots, fragments, […] short stories captured the essentially indefinable nature of identity” (*Women Who Did* lxv). The stories’ male narrators’ subjective rendering of events and impressions, and their pervasive need to find meaning within the female characters they are faced with, however, emphasise that the difficulty of relations between the two sexes lies in the
man’s failure to find that meaning. De Beauvoir stresses the separateness that results from this misunderstanding, but acknowledges man’s complacency with regards to this mystery:

En face d’une vivante énigme, l’homme demeure seul: seul avec ses rêves, ses espoirs, ses craintes, son amour, sa vanité; ce jeu subjectif qui peut aller du vice à l’extase mystique est pour beaucoup une expérience plus attrayante qu’un authentique rapport avec un être humain. (I, 399)

As Richardson notes, “the unknowability of woman is [therefore] reclaimed, and embraced” (Women Who Did lxvi). Staging woman as spectacle, the use of the gaze in New Woman literature destabilises, rather than merely repeats (Pykett 206) the masculine discourse of writing. Through their representation of these female characters as “the Other which is not [their] fellow-creature” (Žižek 90) – a ghost, a woman from a different time, a stranger washed up on a beach, a painter’s model, in short, the observed as opposed to the observer – the narrators in Lee and Grand’s stories underline the separation between themselves as male, and the character they observe as female. In the case of “Dionea”, this distance is further emphasised by the story’s epistolary form, and the absence of letters from Lady Evelyn Savelli in response to those by Doctor Alessandro De Rosis. The erotic interest the female characters inspire in the men positions the narrator and the observed woman as “eromenos (the loved one)” and “erastes (the loving one)” (Žižek 103), further reinforcing this separation, even in the representation of “love”. In the French stories, the recurring sense of a fear of the unknown is highlighted by the objectification of women. Woman, in fact, is presented as desirable to man exclusively through his

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328 “In the company of a living enigma, man remains alone – alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity; this subjective game, which can go all the way from vice to mystical ecstasy, is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being.”
misunderstanding, or distance, from her: thus, she becomes a porcelain doll – “l’œil était pareil à une tache d’encre sur de l’émail blanc” (Maupassant, “L’Inconnue” 227) – and her beauty resides precisely in the inanimate quality perceived by the observer as a result of his distance from her: “Oh! l’étrange regard opaque et vide, sans pensée et si beau!” (Maupassant “L’Inconnue” 227) However, the emphasis on the mystery of woman needs to be further analysed in light of its concerns regarding the mysterious female character in literature. De Beauvoir argues that

[I]a littérature échoue toujours à peindre des femmes “mystérieuses”; elles peuvent seulement apparaître au début du roman comme étranges, énigmatiques; mais à moins que l’histoire ne demeure inachevée, elles finissent par livrer leur secret et elles sont alors des personnages cohérents et translucides. (I, 403)

However, a closer look at characterisation in the short stories considered here, as well as in some of the novels discussed in earlier chapters, seems to suggest otherwise. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, the form of the short story successfully manages to overturn the novel’s impossibility, or inability, of maintaining characterisation to a minimum so as not to completely unveil, as it were, its female characters. The succinctness of the genre quite simply does not allow for such a development of the character to take place. Moreover, the “unity of effect” of the short story makes it possible, even necessary, to maintain a distance from the women these short stories depict. The central theme of these stories revolving around the desired woman and, perhaps more importantly, the seemingly insurmountable distance which separates the man from her, all elements of the piece

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329 “The eye resembled an ink stain on white enamel”.
330 “Oh! the strange, empty and impenetrable gaze, without a thought, and so beautiful!”.
331 “Literature always fails in attempting to portray ‘mysterious’ women; they can appear only at the beginning of the novel as strange, enigmatic figures; but unless the story remains unfinished the give up their secret in the end and they are then simply consistent and transparent persons”.

will work towards maintaining this idea throughout them. The second reason which challenges de Beauvoir’s idea is the importance that is given to the dichotomy of reality and appearance within the female characters, not only in these short stories, but also in the novels that are considered in the previous chapters. Taking further the idea found in Zola and Maupassant’s short stories about the fear of consummation, the New Woman authors articulate a complex discourse in which the very desire the man feels for the woman is what separates the two genders. “I thought more or less about Theodora, and mostly about the state of my own feelings” (Cross 21), says Cecil in “Theodora.” Accentuating her “mystery”, the man’s desire baffles and alienates him completely from her. De Beauvoir argues that the “mysterious” quality of the woman is not due to an inherent trait within her, but to the distance that separates the man from her:

Dire que la femme est mystère, c’est non dire qu’elle se tait mais que son langage n’est pas entendu; elle est là, mais cachée sous des voiles; elle existe par-delà ces incertaines apparitions. Qui est-elle? […] On suppose ou bien qu’il existe à ces questions des réponses impossibles à découvrir, ou plutôt qu’aucune n’est adéquate parce qu’une fondamentale ambiguïté affecte l’être féminin. (I, 400-1)332

However, using this mystery endows these female characters with the power they have over the men they encounter, and it is by using the male narration that the New Woman stories reclaim that mystery. As de Beauvoir contends,

comme tous les opprimés, elle dissimule délibérément sa figure objective; […] , tous ceux qui dépendent des caprices d’un maître ont

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332 To say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not heard; she is there, yet she is hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? […] It may be supposed either that there are answers to these questions which are impossible to discover, or […], that no answer is adequate because a fundamental ambiguity marks the feminine being".
appris à lui opposer un immuable sourire ou une énigmatique impassibilité; leurs vrais sentiments, leurs vraies conduites, ils les cachent soigneusement […] Elle les aborde avec des visages d’emprunt; elle est prudente, hypocrite, comédienne. (I, 402-3)\textsuperscript{333}

\textbf{Fear and Loving in the Fin de Siècle}

For Rebecca Stott, Maupassant’s \textit{contes fantastiques} provide “a space ‘outside’ normality, order, light, \textit{outside ‘masculine’ logic,} reason, culture” (31, my italics). I will now address the question of what Bertrand-Jennings’s analysis of Zola’s œuvre terms the “mythologie dont la femme se trouve être le support” (9)\textsuperscript{334}. How is this mythology of woman constructed, and how does it affect the depictions of female sexuality and subjectivity found in these works? There are several ways in which the process of mythologising takes place in the works by Zola and Maupassant. Firstly, the choice of vocabulary describing the man’s feelings is extremely precise in its insistence on the loss of reason and excessive, almost false, joy that it brings: “follement amoureux”, “extase de bonheur”, “félicité surhumaine”, “passion inapaisée” (Maupassant, “Apparition” 160)\textsuperscript{335}. Moreover, the female character is also sometimes compared to a deity\textsuperscript{336}, Julien wanting to apologise to Thérèse “comme à une \textit{sainte}” (“Pour une Nuit d’Amour” 32, my italics)\textsuperscript{337}, and the

\textsuperscript{333} “Like all the oppressed, woman deliberately dissembles her objective actuality; […] all who are dependent upon the caprices of a master have learned to turn toward him a changeless smile, or an enigmatic impassivity, their real sentiments, their actual behaviour, are carefully hidden. […] In speaking to them she wears an artificial expression on her face; she is cautious, hypocritical, playacting”.

\textsuperscript{334} “Mythology supported by the female figure”.

\textsuperscript{335} “Madly in love”, “ecstatic happiness”, “superhuman bliss”, “unappeased passion”.

\textsuperscript{336} Again, the image of religion returns in the depiction of sexuality. See my analysis of eroticism as worship in Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{337} “As if to a saint”.
infatuated baron describing his admiration for his *inconnue* as “l’envie furieuse de lui parler, de m’agenouiller, de lui dire l’émotion qui m’étranglait” (227, my italics). These chaotic manifestations of adoration on the part of the male characters are characterised by their usage of submissive language and ideas, which rapidly convey the sense of fear underlying them. As Stott contends, “if [...] she is a sign of multiple Otherness (chaos, darkness, atavism, twilight, other worlds, even death) then her outstretched arms desire, in the male imagination, to draw the male down into that Other world” (38). It is thus that the female-god takes on the shape of Diana the huntress, “ce regard lourd et vague [...] comme [...] ces liquides épais dont se servent les pieuvres pour obscurcir l’eau et endormir leurs proies”, “celle qui m’aurait pris comme un linot avec l’appât de sa chair fraîche” (Maupassant, “L’Inconnue” 229, 226). The admirer becomes the prey, in a reversal of roles which overthrows the man from his higher position, and pushes him even further down the ladder into a position of prostration and fright. Despite being characterised as an animal hunting for its prey, the female character in these works is, to a large extent, qualified and depicted as being unnatural.

Despite the anxiety and fear that are expressed in all these works, like the *femme fatale*, the heroines of these texts inspire “a range of emotions, from horror and hatred to admiration and desire” (Sully 46) in the men who encounter them. It is important to note that the men’s pursuit of the women is one of the features that define the female characters as assertive, powerful, and sexual. In all cases, the man is drawn to the woman, who, as the mythologising of her figure and the enormous influence of the male narrators suggest, is not just adored, but *created* by

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338 “The furious desire to talk to her, to kneel before her, to express the emotion that was strangling me”.
339 “That heavy, vague look, [...] similar to those thick liquids used by octopuses to darken the waters and put their prey to sleep”, “she who would have lured me like a little bird with the bait of her flesh”.
the male gaze. The duality of innocence and evil conferred to Thérèse and the other characters considered here results in parallel binary reactions from Julien, Roger, and the other nameless men in the stories. Thus, solitude is represented as enjoyable, but the balance is redressed when the very same character affirms that “c’est meilleur d’aimer, mais terrible” (“La Chevelure” 186). The main character in “La Chevelure” articulates an elaborate discourse on the joy and pain which, in all these texts, inevitably arise in the presence of the loved woman: “Elle m’obsédait, me hantait. J’étais heureux et torturé, comme dans une attente d’amour, comme après les aveux qui précèdent l’étreinte” (191). Zola’s short story synthesises both his and Maupassant’s intention to convey this duality when Julien describes his feelings for Thérèse as “une peur délicieuse, dont il jouissait” (26). In surprisingly similar terms, Lee’s Spiridon Trepka declares that the feeling he has for Medea “terrifies [him], but it is delicious” (“Amour Dure” 67), and “Dionea”’s heroine provokes “an expression rather of fear than of love” (85) in the young men of Montemirto. Sarah Grand uses the same terminology, her painter saying that his model had “the kind of glance which either fascinates or creates a feeling of repulsion” (“The Undefinable” 118).

The paradoxical cherishing of the unease which is directly linked to the presence of the woman is reinforced by a systematic capitulation: “sans chercher à l’expliquer” (Maupassant, “Apparition” 160), denoting an inability to categorise and rationalise on the part of the male narrator of the stories, thus emphasising the importance of the female presence as a threat to the common associations of the feminine with the emotive and the masculine with the rational at the time. “Julien ne

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340 “Loving is better, yet terrible”.
341 “I was obsessed with her, she haunted me. I was happy and tortured, as when one is waiting for love, and as after the admissions which precede embraces”.
342 “An exquisite fear which he savoured”.
343 “Without attempting to explain it”.
raconta pas qu’il l’avait aperçue en cheveux, le cou nu. Il était très inquiet; il éprouvait un sentiment indéfinissable contre cette jeune fille, qui allait déranger ses habitudes” (Zola, “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” 23).

344 Julien’s anxiety finds expression in a worry about an upsetting of his routine, and, in a detail which might at first seem unimportant, belittles Thérèse’s influence on him by referring to her as “jeune fille”, “young girl”, instead of “jeune femme”, “young woman”, thereby lexically undermining her womanhood, and, by doing so, the strength of her sexual impact on him. The soldier in “Apparition” automatically reaches for his sword upon encountering his friend’s ghostly wife (164), as if to emphasise the male character’s need to somehow establish his masculinity in facing the woman, the sword clearly representing a phallic symbol of his supposed superiority over her. In what is an attempt to reinstate a hierarchical structure in which the man wields the power, a language of warfare is used in the case of “Apparition”, for example, the narrator drawing a parallel between the sentiment evoked by encountering the woman with “la vraie panique des batailles” (165).

345 The men want to “conquérir, prendre, posséder; avoir une femme, c’est la vaincre” (Beauvoir I, 258).

346 In “Masquerade Liberties and Female Power in Le Fanu’s Carmilla”, Tammis Elise Thomas writes:

> In his study on the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov points out that the development of plot is contingent upon the destabilisation of an initial equilibrium. In the genre of the fantastic, a supernatural intervention is usually the necessary catalyst for narrative. In other words, the occurrence that precipitates narrative movement is usually a mysterious or an inexplicable invasion that radically disturbs the

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344 Julien did not say how he had seen her with her hair down, he was very worried; he had an undefinable feeling towards this young girl, who was going to upset his habits”.

345 “The real panic of battles”.

346 “Conquer, possess, take; to have a woman means to defeat her”.
stability of ordinary fictional existence. According to Todorov, the
marvellous element is the narrative raw material that best performs the
function of narrative catalyst. Social and literary functions here
coincide, for, as Todorov points out, the central concern in both cases
centres on transgression of the law: ‘Whether it is in social life or in
narrative, the intervention of the supernatural element always
constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules, and in so
doing finds its justification’. (Thomas 40)

Long and Jones’s description of the decadent novel of the 1890s as “that novel
in which a supposed aesthetic activity or quest takes precedence over all the
conditions and conventions of the real world” (249) echoes Todorov’s idea of a
destabilised equilibrium. These two definitions seem to come together quite nicely
when one considers the irruption of the fantastic into the fictional world of Lee’s
stories, one of the elements which cause the destabilisation identified by Todorov,
and the suspension of reality of the decadent novel. However, there are two
additional elements which strengthen the break in that system of pre-established
rules mentioned above, and, in doing so, render the fantastic genre an appropriate
vehicle for the contemporary agenda of the New Woman. By systematically setting
the action of her stories in remote locations – fictional towns in Italy, and a mansion
in the heart of the English countryside – Lee effectively removes the pressure which
can result from the more urban setting of 1890s London, for example. Urbania,
Montemirto and Okehurst thus function as hermetically closed spaces; the power
that drives the stories’ plots comes from the ability to transcend time that is granted
to the characters in those very places. In the case of “Dionea”, this strong connection
to the past is not present, but the schism between Montemirto and the rest of the
contemporary world takes form in the gaps that become apparent from the one-sided epistolary form of the story and the construction of Rome as “other”. The idea of “place” is central to these stories. At a time when “the woman’s sphere was the home, while the man’s sphere was the rest of the world” (C. Nelson, “Part I” ix), Lee gives her characters the power to transcend the gendered spheres. “Amour Dure”’s Medea da Carpi thus brings Renaissance Italy’s powerful women into late-nineteenth-century Urbania, and “Oke”’s Mrs. Oke creates her own character – and has an adulterous relationship – even within the restricted mansion she lives in.347

Closely related to the issues of place in Lee’s stories is the problem of time. Women’s “desire for emancipation came at a time when [their] lives had already begun to improve” (C. Nelson, “Part I” x). Whilst Patricia Pulham insists that “the predominance of the ‘Past’ in Lee’s works suggests not only a historical past, but also a psychic past” (Pulham xvii), it seems to me that her usage of Renaissance Italy merges the decadent novel’s “rejection of present-day civilisation” (Long and Jones 246) with a desire to contrast the issues at stake within the contemporary New Woman debate, in a way which mirrors the need to set the stories in remote locations. The past thus emerges not only as a liberated time, but, more significantly, as a liberating time during which these issues can be broached outside of the fin-de-siècle context. Auerbach suggests that “[a]s an essentially metaphysical creature, one whose very presence brings eternity into time, woman enlarged by myth has more in common with fictional creations than she does with living men; her fictionality is one source of the energy that aggrandises her” (15). Yet, this very mythologising,

347 This is almost an overturning of what Terry Castle terms the “ghosting of the lesbian” (5) in fantastic fiction. Castle argues that the ghost story provided a space within which the lesbian could be represented as “spectral” in order to expel her “from the ‘real’ world of the fiction – as if vaporised by the forces of heterosexual propriety” (7). Instead of the “whiting out” (7) of the lesbian women described by Castle, the female characters in Lee’s stories are liberated precisely through their connection with the ghostly, the supernatural, and the transcendence of time and space.
through the recurrent images of women as ghosts – or, in the case of “Oke of Okehurst”, longing to be ghosts, to live with ghosts – and therefore, as dead, enables the figure of the woman to remain fixed, not only in time, but in age, seductiveness, and beauty.

Non-Reproductive Sexuality and the Destruction of the Masculine

In The Insatiability of Human Wants, Regenia Gagnier exposes Kant’s ethical aesthetics in the Critique of Judgement. For Kant, she says, the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and the beautiful object is “typically a natural object theoretically accessible to all, rather than a work of art, which […] may give rise to an element of ego or possessiveness” (124). This is in stark contrast to the “narrow view of art for art’s sake […] that art and literature comprise a disinterested realm of beauty” (Gagnier, The Insatiability of Human Wants 116). Without going into detail about Lee’s involvement in the Aesthetic movement, I would like to consider its ideas about “art for art’s sake”. In Lee’s own words,

Beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad: it is aesthetically good, even as virtue is neither aesthetically good nor aesthetically bad, but morally good. Beauty is pure, complete, egotistic: it has no other value than its being beautiful. (Belcaro 210)348

The paintings and sculptures of women in Lee’s works showcase the idea of beauty without purpose, and bring to attention the question of non-reproductive sexuality.

348 This is close to Théophile Gautier’s idea that “rien de ce qui est beau n’est indispensable à la vie” (n.p.) – “nothing which is beautiful is indispensable in life” – in his preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), which is widely considered to be the first manifesto of l’art pour l’art, or art for art’s sake.
Nina Auerbach notes that “Victorian culture abounds in icons of beautiful corpselike women and in women [...] who are transfigured in trance, sleep, lifelike death, or embalmed life” (41). It is interesting how these stories, in very different ways, use strategies to invalidate their female characters’ reproductive functions in order to undermine their femininity. In these stories, “the beauty of Woman is conceived as a mask for decay, and the sexual relation with her as a form of death rather than of conception” (Bronfen 67). Like Cross’s Theodora, who, as I noted in the first chapter, is repeatedly described as unfit to be a mother by the narrator (10), for example, Mrs. Oke does not have children and, to the great dismay of her husband, does not wish to, either. Moreover, when the woman depicted is a ghost, and therefore dead, as in the case of Medea, the unnamed ghost in “Apparition”, and the dead woman in “La Chevelure”, and, similarly, in depicting a woman who not only identifies with a dead relative of hers, but also maintains some kind of relationship with said relative’s ghostly, and also dead, lover, the idea of motherhood is completely cut out of the picture. The recurring artistic imagery of “the [...] portrait is [...] elusive in its evocation for [...] it [...] can be no more than an ‘absent presence’” (Pulham 116), a presence that does not serve what was considered woman’s main function at the time, that of reproduction. In Monuments and Maidens, Marina Warner elaborates on the idea of male artistic creation and female inspiration, identifying its resulting confusion “of women and art, [...] underpin[ning] the idea that man is maker and woman made, in mythic reversal [sic] of biology” (n.p.). This reversal’s intended effect is to undermine the importance of women’s role as mothers: it is the men’s attempt to redefine gendered roles, and to claim the power of creation for themselves.
The theme of reproduction is a recurrent one in the stories. Felski notes that “in the discourse of sexology, the category of perversion effectively embraced every sexual practice that did not serve the ends of reproduction” (178). Maupassant’s “La Mère aux Monstres” (1883) narrates the story of a woman who “produces” deformed and monstrous children in order to sell them to freak shows. It is narrated by a man who had been taken to her house by a friend. The idea that beauty was more important to the story’s “la Diable”, the “She-Devil”, as she is known in her village, than the health of her child, is the extreme expression of sexuality as an end in itself. This character not only uses her sexuality, but the very vulnerability that characterises the female sex in order to become rich and live a bourgeois lifestyle. In the story, the image of a child sitting on the sand with a pair of crutches beside him, unable to join the beautiful young woman admired by all on the beach, symbolises the lack of abidance to some natural law which would put the care of the child above all other needs for the mother. Here, the anxiety surrounding female eroticism focusses on a fear of women’s disregard for their “natural role” and “function” as mothers, which, if suppressed, would annihilate the division of the sexes. The story, therefore, seems to pose an essential question: if motherhood – and, therefore, other consequences of sexuality such as reputation, for example – is no longer a worrying, or even deterring issue for women, what is it that differentiates their sexuality from a man’s?

As demonstrated in previous chapters, Émile Zola’s concern, as the principal exponent of the naturalist school, was to introduce the scientific method to the novel, and, in doing so, demonstrate the passing of hereditary defects from generation to generation, in his Rougon-Macquart cycle. Whilst “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” does not belong to the series, the author’s interest in the influence of
heredity and milieu, and therefore reproduction, on female eroticism appears here too. Zola points to an uncle of Thérèse as having her same violent temperament, her father’s fear of “mal étrange” (39)\(^{349}\) is strangely reminiscent of the *Rougon-Macquart*’s concern with heredity. It is interesting to see how, here, contrary to what happens in the cycle of novels, the hereditary *fêlure*, defect, comes not from a woman, but a man. This further emphasises the importance of the reversal of gender roles within the sexually exuberant woman who uses sexuality to obtain power. Her violent temperament coming from a man, the “unnatural” power which results from it gains greater importance. Furthermore, the reader is also informed of her rape by Colombel at a young age. It is not this mere fact, but the striking way in which Zola manages to intertwine the issues of milieu, heredity, and gender hierarchy, that gives the following passage its interest: “là, il la jeta par terre, et il la viola sur de la paille. Enfin, son tour était venu d’être le maître” (43).\(^{350}\) This passage brings to mind Renée Saccard’s rape in *La Curée*, written ten years earlier. In the case of “La mère aux monstres”, the “accident” of motherhood is deviated into a way of earning money. The negation of the figure of the “mother-woman”, and therefore of woman as giving life, gives rise to the recurring images of deadly – and, sometimes, also dead – women in these stories.

Aside from the fantastic short story’s depictions of women who are not mothers, these characters also thwart the men’s work, highlighting a “reciprocal relation of creation and destruction” (Bronfen 112). In “Amour Dure”, Spiridon’s reason for travelling to Italy, his research, is obliterated by his obsession with Medea. The unnamed painter in “Oke of Okehurst” never finishes his picture, despite filling a whole book with sketches of his model. I agree with Sondeep Kandola’s statement

\(^{349}\) “Strange disease”.

\(^{350}\) “It was then and there that he threw her on the floor and raped her on the hay. It was finally his turn to become the master”.
that “the artist’s failure to master his Mona Lisa [...] generates a reaction on his part that implicitly figures her as an embodiment of an evil and destructive femininity” (26). The painter in “The Undefinable”, who, at the beginning of the story was a most self-satisfied character, becomes unable to work when his model disappears, roaming the streets in search for her. Similarly, Cecil in “Theodora” gives his treasured book of sketches and memories to the story’s eponymous heroine. In “Dionea”, Alessandro De Rosis fails in his attempt to (indirectly) raise her, the circular story ending with the heroine going “back to the sea” from where she came.

At a time when women were defending their right to enter the workplace, and were perceived as threatening to invade the men’s sphere in doing so, the destruction of the male characters’ work in these stories comes across as an allegory of the perceived attack of women upon men. While “fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, [...] it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (R. Jackson 20). Yet, the question returns: why do women writers choose to represent female characters who threaten to destroy men? In ascribing fantastical and evil qualities to their characters, Lee, Grand (and Cross) are destabilising the ideal of the “Angel in the house”. In “One is Not Born a Woman”, Monique Wittig denounces the praise that is given to women on the sole premise of their sex:

What the concept of ‘woman is wonderful’ accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features [...] which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’ which are political categories and not natural givens. (2017)
These evil characters join “the many [male-authored] Salomes and Judiths whose lust to decapitate derives from male anxiety about increasing female empowerment” (Ruddick 193). In vilifying their female characters, the New Woman writers, but also Zola and Maupassant, open their fiction to allow for a much wider, freer discourse on female sexuality. The “violation of dominant assumptions” found in fantastic literature allows it “to subvert (overturn, upset, undermine) rules and conventions taken to be normative” (R. Jackson 14), and this is taken further in the characterisation of the women in these stories. The erotic fascination that these characters exert whilst effectively taking the power to work away from the man, and the fact that none of these relationships is ever consummated, represents the emasculation of the men through their loss of work-power. While the emasculation of the men in the New Woman stories takes place mostly through the reclaiming of female sexuality as non-reproductive and the destruction of work, in the French works it is situated within a discourse on a loss of virility.

Despite their desire for them, the men in these texts struggle when confronted with the erotic nature of the women they pursue, because its strength undermines their control over them. The female character’s change from a creature of the man’s mind, whom he can mould and define as he pleases, to a real person who defies, and negates this mental image, is a way to dispel masculine control. Maupassant’s “L’Inconnue” (1885) is the story of a man’s fascination with an unknown woman he sees on the street. When he finally decides to speak to her, she offers to go and visit him the following morning. When she arrives, and as she begins to undress, he sees a large dark mark on her back, and is unable to make love to her. Its main character, Roger expresses his attempt to “deviner ce qu’elle était” (229).351

351 “Guess what she was”.
In the process, he transforms the “inconnue” into a heroine from *Thousand and One Nights*, “un de ces êtres perfides et dangereux qui ont pour mission d’entraîner les hommes en des abîmes inconnus” (230), as opposed to simply acknowledging and perhaps accepting what she is. Emmanuèle Grandadam maintains that Maupassant’s narrators complacently indulge in fantasies which prevent them from seeing women in their *alterité*, their otherness (189). However, I would argue that, while the male characters undeniably attempt to deny this otherness, it is their failure to do so, and their ultimate need to confront it, which Maupassant chooses to foreground. I therefore feel that the strength of Maupassant, but also of Zola’s fiction, resides precisely in their depictions of woman as “other”, in their recognition of what separates the male narrators from the women they desire. Maupassant tends to reinforce the image of the other as a fascinating and threatening figure, in a femininity that is at once tempting and vile, alienating, and identified with evil and death (Richter 20-1). The male narrators are not only attempting to reflect their own emptiness and project it onto the women, but, much more significantly, they are forced to recognise the autonomy of women as the cause of it. Women become that which is evil and dark, and man depicts himself as helpless and manipulated by them: “elle est d’abord image, miroir des désirs de celui qui les élabore, mais aussi de ses peurs et de ses angoisses” (Grandadam 90). The encounter with the real woman is therefore a traumatic one: “il eût presque peur d’elle, *tant elle était différente de l’image gaie qu’il s’en était faite*. Elle avait surtout une bouche un peu grande, d’un rouge vif, et des yeux profonds, noirs et sans éclat, qui lui donnaient un

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352 “One of those dangerous, treacherous beings whose mission it is to drag men to unknown abysses”.

353 “She is, first of all, an image, the mirror of the man in question’s desires, yet also of his fears and anxieties”. 
air de reine cruelle” (Zola, “Pour une Nuit d'Amour” 25, my italics). Here, instead of the tender, loving image he was expecting, Julien sees a woman whose attributes are depicted in a way which accentuates her voracious sexuality (the red mouth), an impenetrable interior (the dark eyes), and a splendid superiority over him (he concludes by saying she appears as a cruel queen). Anne Richter writes that “la femme-vampire est supplantée par la femme-objet, ou mieux encore, l'objet-femme: pérennité de la chose exquise” (21).

Ceasing to be a fixed object when she is approached by the man, or even more so when she approaches him, the illusion of understanding, complete possession, and, therefore, of control, is lost, causing the sexual act never to be consummated, and, furthermore, the end of desire itself. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek writes about courtly love and male desire:

> [w]hat the paradox of the Lady in courtly love ultimately amounts to is thus the paradox of *detour*: our “official” desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours – what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another ordeal, yet one more postponement. (96)

In Žižek’s analysis of courtly love, the focus remains on the man. Yet, if we take this idea further, applying it to the short stories in this chapter, the wish for postponement, the fear induced by desire, in fact emphasises the woman’s subjectivity through man’s recognition of her Self.

In her examination of the creation of the *femme fatale* as a figure in Victorian fiction, Rebecca Stott describes her as “a powerful and threatening figure, bearing a

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354 “She was so different from the cheerful image he had formed of her that she almost frightened him. Above all, she had a mouth that was deep red, and quite large, as well as deep, black, dull eyes, which gave her the appearance of a cruel queen”.

355 “The vampire-woman is replaced by the woman-object and the durability of the exquisite object”.
sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious, or fatal to her male partners” (Stott viii).
Some of these women not only create sexual anxiety for the male characters, but become figures who, ultimately, destroy the man’s virility, his own sexual power, by overturning the conventional assumptions about a more passive female sexuality. “L’Inconnue” and “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” shed light on the significance of these depictions of destroyed masculinity. In both stories, the male protagonist is unable to consummate his relationship with the woman he desires. Whilst it is important to take into account the element of fantasy present within the short story, ultimately, it is the inconnue’s sexual assertion, and, therefore, power, which castrates Roger des Annettes, and Julien.

Micheline Besnard-Coursodon considers that, for Maupassant’s characters, to be possessed, attracted, in love, with a woman means to move closer to death (55): my focus is not on the deadly character of the powerful sexuality of these female characters, in the form which results as fatal to her male counterpart, but on the recurring equation of the female as other, and therefore as death, in its opposition to life, and, by extension, the masculine. “Death, because it is beyond any speaking subject’s experiential realm, is always culturally constructed, always metaphorical”, Elizabeth Bronfen argues (72). The systematic parallelisms drawn between the feminine and death, in plotlines as diverse as the appearance of a ghostly female, as in “Apparition”, the finding of a woman’s dead hair in an old cabinet, as in “La Chevelure”, or a woman who murders her young lover in bed, as in “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”, need to be considered as more than a flourishing expression of the Gothic, or fantasy, genre.

These female characters have the common trait of having the power to debilitate the men they come into contact with: “Apparition”’s narrator refers to his
encounter with the female ghost by grouping it with “les secrets pénibles, les secrets honteux, toutes les inavouables faiblesses que nous avons dans notre existence” (160). Similarly, Julien describes himself as “plus débile qu’un enfant, malgré ses larges épaules” (“Pour une Nuit d’Amour” 25), reducing a grown man to a child. As I have noted, one of the defining features which position threat almost as an inherent trait of eroticism is the sense of a loss of control characterising the man’s relationship with the woman. If Maupassant’s “La Chevelure” is to be considered as a symbolic representation of female sexuality, and the narrator’s discovery of the mass of hair in a hidden panel inside a piece of antique furniture as the beginning of a sexual relationship with a woman, then the story which has so often been read as an example of fetishism or even necrophilia here becomes the recounting of a male character’s loss of control over his desire for a woman. This man “falls in love with” a simple strand of hair, removing female agency and subjectivity from the relationship which develops between the man and the woman (the strand of hair). This is similar to the characters’ efforts to fix women in objects of art, yet this man succeeds because, in his madness, he cannot “see the woman for the hair”. Verbs like “hanter”, to haunt, are very common in these texts, and this not exclusively due to the fantasy of such short stories. The usage of such vocabulary in fact serves to highlight and intensify the loss of agency on the part of the male characters in them: the man becomes a helpless figure, and it is the woman who enters his thoughts and his dreams. While John C. Lapp argues that this type of female figure is “unconscious of the effect of her power” (279), the works analysed in this chapter seem to prove otherwise.

356 “The painful, dishonourable secrets, all the shameful weaknesses we all have in our existence”.
357 “Weaker than a child, despite his large shoulders”.
The significance of the emasculation performed by the female characters is taken further in texts which depict the death of the lover, and this is done in two different ways. For Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, “la répulsion invincible qui accompagne l’acte de génération trouve son expression la plus achevée dans le motif du cadavre-séparant-les-amants” (Bertrand-Jennings 16). This image, however, as exemplified in “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” or Thérèse Raquin, for example, is the reflection and embodiment of the man’s loss of virility, and represents a circularity in which the vision of the dead body not only causes, but is also the result of, the woman’s strong sexuality. “The slaying of the lover by the woman” (Lapp 283) is thus twofold. In “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”, the brutal “de-objectifying” of Thérèse through the revelation of her sordid affair and murder of Colombel leaves Julien literally paralyzed, unable and unwilling to go back to her: as de Beauvoir points out, “l’homme […] n’a plus de volonté, plus de projet, plus d’avenir” (I, 275). Julien realises that the end of the ordeals and postponements, to use Žižek’s words, signifies the end of life itself: “[i]l n’irait plus le lendemain à la poste, c’était inutile; il ne jouerait plus de la flûte, il ne se mettrait plus à la fenêtre” (63). The ending of the story is extraordinarily similar, even in its terminology, to a section of Le Deuxième Sexe in which de Beauvoir describes men’s reaction to mythologised, terrifying femmes fatales. The verb “dormir”, to sleep, echoes throughout the end of the story and becomes a haunting, obsessive thought for Julien: “dormir, dormir toujours… […] pourquoi ne pas dormir tout le temps?” (Zola, “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” 63-4); de Beauvoir writes that “l’amante entraîne l’amant à renoncer à la

358 The invincible repulsion which accompanies the act of reproduction finds its most accomplished expression in the image of the ‘corpse-separating-the-lovers’.
359 “He no longer has a will, projects, or a future”.
360 “He would not go to the post office the next day, it was useless; he would not play the flute, would not sit at the window again”.
361 “To sleep, to always sleep… […] why not sleep all the time?”
vie et à s’abandonner au suprême sommeil” (I, 275). Realising that a love story with Thérèse has become impossible, and his life futile, Julien “se laissa tomber […] avec un grand rejaillissement d’écume” (64), mirroring de Beauvoir’s own use of water imagery in her depiction of man’s alienation: “il plonge au fond des eaux fuyantes et mortelles” (I, 275). As I have shown, there are several ways in which the lack of reproduction and the destruction of the male characters’ virility function to strengthen the female characters’ sexual subjectivity. Breaking free from the shackles of the primarily reproductive function that was often assigned to women at the time, and asserting their sexuality over the men’s, the women in these stories endure not only as gothic creations, but, more interestingly, as characters who are able to transcend the limitations of their time.

**Women and Class**

In mid- to late-nineteenth century society, “sexually voracious women were […] more likely to be found amongst the working-classes or in ‘primitive’ cultures. […] When diagnosed amongst those of middle classes, [a strong eroticism] was more likely to be read […] as insanity or hysteria” (Stott 71). The idea of class was central to the period’s literary depictions of female eroticism. In this final section, I will examine the way in which the discourse on class enters fantastic texts which are characterised by a pervasive sense of anxiety in relation to the female as a sexual subject. “La Mère aux Monstres” seems to blur the conventional associations of the sexually active, or sexually voracious, working-class woman. The story questions these assumptions from the beginning. It begins with the narrator saying, “Je me suis

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362 “The woman drives her lover to abandon life and to let himself go in a supreme slumber”.
363 “Let himself fall, […] splashing in the foamy water”.
364 “He dives into receding, mortal waters”.
365 Refer to the chapter on prostitution for more on class and sexuality.
rappelé cette horrible histoire et cette horrible femme en voyant passer l’autre jour, sur une plage aimée des riches, une Parisienne connue, jeune, élégante, charmante, adorée et respectée de tous” (146). Maupassant chooses to have his narrator explicitly connect a well-known, respected young woman of the upper-classes with the monstrous woman the story is about. As the story about the “mother of monsters” unfolds, the reader, as well as the narrator, find out that said woman used to be a servant, who, after accidentally becoming pregnant whilst unmarried, also accidentally created the first of her monstrous children by wearing a corset that was too tight in order to conceal the pregnancy and be able to continue working.

When the narrator and his friend visit this woman, her dwelling place is described as “gentil et bien entretenu. Le jardin plein de fleurs sentait bon. On eût dit la demeure d’un notaire retiré des affaires” (146). The financial well-being of “la Diable” allows for an extremely significant point to be made. While the unwanted pregnancy is typical of nineteenth-century literature, depicting the fall of a working-class woman, what ensues is not. The woman’s need to keep working for a living is, presumably, the cause for her need to conceal her pregnancy, and serves not only to stress the dangers of premarital sex, but also the extreme vulnerability to which women are exposed. “La Diable”’s exploitation of the helplessness inherent to her femininity, however, is what constitutes the story’s powerful delineation of a shattered class system, as the story’s narrator recounts her comfortable, rich life. This shattering is

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366 “I remembered this horrible story and this horrible woman when, the other day, on a beach appreciated by the rich, I saw a well-known, young, elegant, charming Parisian woman, adored and respected by all, walk by”.

367 Interestingly, this story situates itself within the debates surrounding the corset which flourished in the nineteenth century. The corset became a controversial topic, and part of this was due to its “negative effects on women’s capacity to bear children” (Rifelj 243). Refer to note 76 in Chapter One for more on the corset, Sarah Grand’s views on its use, and the Rational Dress movement in Britain.

368 “Pretty and well looked after. The garden, full of flowers, smelled nice. It could have been the house of a retired notary”.
directly linked to the story’s female character’s sexuality. “Pour une Nuit d’Amour” heightens its depiction of the dominating female sexual subject by delineating very clearly the class differences between its three characters. Thérèse, the sexually avid heroine, is of noble origins. Her foster-brother and first lover, Colombel, is her nanny’s son, and therefore not only clearly belongs to the working class, but is also, and more significantly, part of Thérèse’s household’s domestic staff, and, as such, “subordinated to her”. Furthermore, their positions are exacerbated as she is referred to as “reine”, and Colombel as “esclave” (41) and as she rides and whips him like a horse when no-one is watching.

Nineteenth-century literature divided its characters, mirroring the period’s social system, into higher and lower classes, and “men and women”. Whilst it might be argued that the concept of class difference could be more accurately described as varying in gradation rather than as a binary construct, it is important to understand that its depiction as such is precisely that which infuses the works considered in my thesis with their intricate parallelism between class and gender difference. These binary constructions establish an order which the texts considered in this analysis of sex as power, however, prove to be disturbed by the perceived sexual initiative taken by women. In “Pour une Nuit d’Amour”, the blurring of boundaries can be seen in Julien’s changing impression of Thérèse. His descriptions of her oscillate between those of a young, idle and innocent, bored young girl he sees in her bedroom, and those of a menacing, indifferent woman, sometimes conveying this paradox all at once: “le visage rose, l’air moqueur, avec des yeux luisants” (25). Maupassant’s “L’Inconnue” takes this idea further, and this is possible precisely because the woman is an “inconnue”, a stranger, to the text’s narrator. Similarly to Julien, Roger

369 The shattering of class systems is a concern that also appears in Zola’s Nana (1880), and which I have discussed in Chapter Three.
370 “A rosy face, a look of disdain, and glistening eyes”.
des Annettes is fascinated by a woman he does not know, yet the mystery she embodies is greater, as she is simply a woman he sees a few times on the street: unlike Julien, he does not have the possibility of finding out her name or her social status. When he finally decides to talk to her, she turns out to be a prostitute who offers to visit him at his home the next morning. What happens after that is a refusal on the part of the man to acknowledge the truth behind his previous idealised vision of the woman: instead of deciding to simply pay her, he buys her a ring, this simple fact exemplifying the man’s denial to acknowledge what she is, the irreconcilability of the imagined and the true woman, of the unknown and of what is revealed.

**Conclusion**

The fin de siècle witnessed “a cultural landscape given over to terrifying metaphors for sexuality” (Kaye 53), with a “complex and sometimes contradictory constellation of differing movements and comprehensions of sexuality unique to the late-Victorian period” (Kaye 54). It seems to me that what brings Zola and Maupassant’s stories close to Lee, Grand and Cross’s is precisely their conveying of female erotic subjectivity. The fear and danger embodied by the women in these stories is, in the case of the French, due to the women’s subjectivity, and in the British, a way of underlining that very agency. All four authors succeed in “attacking the sexual objectification of women” (Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies* 38) though the strategies they employ may at times be different, especially with regards to motherhood and virility. Death becomes an opportunity to reflect on artistic creation and reproduction: the destructive element in these stories serves to emphasise women’s role within society as subjects who create, who give birth, as opposed to objects that are created and moulded by a superior masculine creativity or authority.
I would now like to return to the quotation with which I began the chapter, de Beauvoir’s idea that every myth involves a subject’s projection of his/her hopes and fears. The imbrication of female and male writers, as well as male narrators and desired women is what enriches the discourse on female sexuality in these fantastic pieces. There is a multiplicity of fears and desires that are expressed, from the author’s, to the narrator’s, and the character’s.
In my thesis, I have argued that there are significant similarities between French naturalism and realism and British New Woman literature in their depiction of female sexuality. While contemporary popular opinion, some New Women themselves, and criticism today, have often unfairly opposed these two literatures, I have demonstrated that some very interesting parallels can be drawn between them. The interest of this has been to show how, in a time during which female sexuality was scrutinised from a number of different angles – in medicine, psychology, sexology, criminology, literature – writers like Zola and Maupassant were addressing and exposing the same concerns and problems that New Women voiced at the turn of the century. Gaining greater insight into these works through my comparative analysis has shed light on the frailty of the dichotomies that attempted to structure and define women’s sexuality in the mid- to late- nineteenth century. Both the French and British literature, in fact, questioned dominant notions of what constituted femininity, reinterpreting and offering alternative possibilities for women to experience sexuality. The comparative approach to these authors has enabled me to uncover that their depictions constantly refer to, and in the process question, the binary oppositions on which their contemporary society tended to encase women’s erotic behaviour. In my introduction, I referred to my work as a study in dichotomies: I would therefore like to conclude my thesis with a few remarks on the shattering of these binary constructions of female sexuality.

As I stated in my Introduction, I began this project expecting that the two countries’ literatures would differ significantly in their representations of female
sexuality and desire, yet came to find that there was a strong mirroring of concerns. The interest of the thesis thus became to show how first-wave feminist writers could coincide in their depictions of women’s sexuality with French male writers whom they openly criticised. Popular opinion not only opposed the two groups of writers, but also the French “degenerate woman” and the British New Woman. How could male French writers reconcile their desiring male gaze with their female characters’ subjectivity? Persistently addressing issues related to female sexuality through the systematic questioning and demolishing of these dichotomies, my chosen authors managed to denounce, rather than perpetuate, these binary constructions of women’s sexual identity.

Central to all these questions is the idea of a female sexual subjectivity. Female characters were given the space to express their sexual subjectivity in both literatures. While the need to de-objectify women took the form of social and educational demands in the New Woman works, we have seen that the French male writers constructed this subjectivity around the opposing, yet complementary, poles of their own desiring male gaze, as men, and, as authors, the possibility they gave to their female characters to voice their own, subjective selves.

One set of oppositions cannot be shattered: the opposition between the French aesthetisation of female sexuality, and the New Women’s more sociological concerns. I have shown that the French works managed to bridge the gap between the aesthetic and social demands – Nana constantly aestheticises the prostitute, yet never fails in its portrayal of the difficulties and contradictions of her life, and Une Vie manages to convey the shock of the wedding night, for example, with Jeanne’s romantic ideals, and so on. As women writers, however, the New Woman authors do not aestheticise their female characters’ sexuality, but focus on the sociological
concerns. This difference is, of course, due to the importance of the male gaze, or the masculine perception and point of view, which permeates the literature of the period. The male gaze in both French works and in its narrative presence in Lee, Cross and Grand, highlighted the anxiety caused by the dichotomy of reality and appearance, or the difference between the mythologised, idealised, distant impression men have of women, and the “reality” of them. This, too, is a dichotomy that was systematically demolished, precisely through men’s sexual knowledge of women, and women’s own assertion of themselves as sexual subjects. The contrast between the male characters' idealised, imagined, women, and the way they truly proved to be also helped to convey a strong subjectivity to these female characters.

The prostitute was one of the most fascinating figures in my research: as the emblem of the desiring self, she became the playground for a number of concerns in the fiction of the period. At the centre of the sexual double standard, she facilitated pleasure to the men who preached about women’s passionlessness, yet was also a social pariah, the carrier of diseases, the sewer of the cities. Her status, as I have shown, however, was not all that different from the married woman’s. New Women such as Mona Caird publicly declared the resemblance between the married woman and the prostitute, and both Zola and Maupassant elaborate on this idea in their fiction. The prostitute becomes a site for the emancipation of women, with female characters who demand payment for services rendered from their husbands, or who see prostitution as sexually arousing.

Rather than constituting the conclusion of the novel, marriage often became the point of inflection of such works. No longer seen exclusively as the happy ending sought after by every female character, marriage became a site for the discussion and re-evaluation of women’s traditional roles, creating complex images of wives and
their relationships with their husbands. The French authors had the freedom, as men, to explore the vicissitudes of sexual (dis)satisfaction: questions regarding sexual initiation and awakening were thus central to Maupassant’s *Une Vie*, and even Zola’s *Une Page d’Amour*. Husband-characters departed from the realm of the young girl’s dreams and entered into a much more real, disillusioned discourse on sexual vice and infidelity. Sarah Grand showed how promiscuous husbands damaged their wives’ physical and mental health: Edith dies from syphilis in *The Heavenly Twins*, and Ideala’s eponymous heroine loses all chances of happiness to stay true to a husband who is, to all effects, absent from her own life. Similarly, Julien, in *Une Vie*, represents an adulterous male figure who has much in common with Mosley in *The Heavenly Twins*, for example.

The contrast between the French and British was more pronounced in the case of the representations of prostitution. Despite being a central issue for both sets of writers, New Women still had to write in a “ladylike” manner, and could not be so explicit about such matters. While the similarity between the wife and prostitute could be tackled by Sarah Grand, Zola and Maupassant’s fiction, in its directness, can be seen as almost complementary to the New Women’s in this case. While Grand, for example, had to find strategies to circumvent showing the prostitute herself, it seems to me that she is in a way showing the other side of the coin: the doctors, in *The Beth Book*, and the ravages of syphilis, in *The Heavenly Twins*, thus complement the story of Nana’s life, humanising the prostitute.

The opposition of women as instinctive creatures and men as intelligent, thinking beings, gains great significance in the novels and short fiction I chose. A paradox in itself – women were thought to be instinctive, physical beings, yet at the same time regarded as, or demanded to be, sexless – both French and New Woman
writers of the period address questions of reason and sensation, creating complex images of female eroticism. As I have shown, in fact, the rationality of the New Woman characters clashes with the more animalistic side of Zola’s heroines. What brings these depictions together is the acknowledgment, on both sides, of the presence, if not the prevalence, of the mind, even in sexuality. While Zola often portrays his heroines privileging sensation over reflection, and the New Woman characters place reflection above sensation, there is always a process of self-examination that is caused by desire and sexuality. Desire never merely gives way to animalistic instincts, but rather elicits intricate reflections on the (sexual) Self. Sexuality becomes an occasion for introspection, for a deeper understanding of one’s nature, and how this interacts with one’s experiences. Even in Thérèse Raquin, the heroine uses the thought processes unchained by her desire to expose who she is, not only to her lover, but, much more significantly, to herself. In some cases, desire and the sexual instincts are the product of the mind, yet this is an altogether less positive view: in La Curée, we can see how the corrupting influence of the Second Empire generates sensual thoughts, which, in turn, push the female character to commit incest.

The highest form of reflection on sensation gives rise to a questioning of the role of motherhood. In Zola’s Nana, the novel’s heroine’s surprise upon becoming pregnant frames all of these narratives’ dualities of the mother-lover: “elle avait une continuelle surprise, comme dérangée dans son sexe; ça faisait donc des enfants, même lorsqu’on ne voulait pas et qu’on employait ça à d’autres affaires?” (363). Motherhood has a central place in all questions relating to female sexuality. One of the many effects of the rise of sexology at the end of the nineteenth century was that

371 “She was incessantly surprised, as if her sex had been disturbed; it made children, then, even when you did not want it to, and used it for other purposes?”
of an increased focus on the relationship between women’s reproductive role and their sexuality. Unsurprisingly, therefore, my analyses of the novels and short stories have shown a prevalent concern with motherhood and its role vis-à-vis the female erotic self. The depictions of the sexual mother are by no means homogeneous; on the contrary, they reflect the concerns of the period through their sheer diversity. The mothers in these works cover a wide spectrum, ranging from Hélène Grandjean’s daughter’s tragic death, to Thérèse Raquin provoking a beating from her lover to cause an miscarriage, but also Gallia’s eugenic project, and Jeanne’s vision of motherhood as an alternative to marital happiness, for example. These diverging attitudes to motherhood initially seem irreconcilable, yet, as is clear in the thesis, these different representations come together in their assertion of an interdependence of the erotic and the reproductive in women. These representations re-interpret, and ultimately, overturn the traditional role of female sexuality as a means for procreation, and by extension, the submission of women to that biological imperative. These fictions situate motherhood as the differentiating, yet empowering ability of women. Questioning normative patterns of progression from childhood to maternity, becoming a mother is no longer women’s biological destiny, but becomes the result of a choice to further the betterment of the race for Gallia, to devote herself to a love that will not betray her for Jeanne, etc.

As I have often stated, there was a strong prejudice of class in nineteenth-century conceptions of female sexuality: while middle or higher class ladies were assumed to be pure and sexless, working-class women were regarded as the opposite. The way in which the French and British works deal with the issue of class is different, but the shattering of class systems remains the same.
The fourth chapter of the thesis is a special case, as it sets itself apart due to my choice to examine the fantastic short stories of Maupassant, Zola and Lee. In the case of such fiction, the representation becomes an intricate, complex interweaving of concerns and perspectives, yet, as we have seen, addresses the same problems. One of the most interesting aspects about comparing female eroticism in such fiction was the unveiling of almost identical strategies and imagery in both male- and female-authored works: the female ghost, the subdued, adoring male gaze, the images of death and destruction, the attempt to fix the female subject into the object of art. Far from conveying a negative image of female sexuality and of her erotic potential, I think these fantastic pieces used the processes of “Othering” in their most extreme forms. In the association of women with these extreme signs of otherness – death, destruction, etc. – the very process of othering is dismantled, and female subjectivity reinstated.

Both French and British authors questioned the ideas surrounding female sexuality in contrast with “love.” Sometimes seen as a legitimating of eroticism, love served as a purifying force for many of the heroines I considered. This need to legitimate desire was, however, different in France and Britain: the novels of Sarah Grand, for example, with their moralising tone and content, required a greater emphasis on this than Zola’s, who used the idea in a more confused manner.

De Beauvoir writes that, “suivant Hegel on découvre dans la conscience elle-même une fondamentale hostilité à l’égard de toute autre conscience; le sujet ne se pose qu’en s’opposant; il prétend s’affirmer comme l’essentiel et constituer l’autre en inessentiel, en objet” (Beauvoir I, 19). These opposing subjectivities, this drive to be the one, and to oppose one’s self to the “Other” enriches the comparisons

372 “Following Hegel’s thought, we discover that there is in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility to every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed: he sets himself as the essential, making the other the inessential, the object.”
between all the texts. It is not just the French authors who make use of the male gaze, but also Vernon Lee in her short stories, or Victoria Cross in “Theodora”, for example. This multiplicity of voices and perspectives creates an interplay of observer and observed which lends the female characters their subjectivity: a subjectivity that cannot be denied, and which they themselves constantly reassert through their reflections, their appraisals of motherhood, their reflections on love, pleasure and marriage. Both the French and British works thus depict the paradoxical situation of women, who are shown to be constantly called to move from one side of a dichotomy to the other. The originality of these works resides in the female characters’ ability to transcend the power of the dichotomous social construction of them as women, and to negotiate an intermediate space for themselves, which they create themselves as a result of their experience. Some characters choose to disregard their sexual instinct: this is the position of many of Grand’s heroines, such as Evadne, or Ideala. Gallia and Jeanne place motherhood as their highest calling. Yet, other characters do not choose between two states and find their subjectivity in the blurring of such distinctions: such is the case of the heroines of Maupassant’s stories, who use fantasies of prostitution within their lives as wives, etc.

Female sexuality thus becomes, in all these works, an occasion for the exposing and re-defining of women’s place and role in society, but, most of all, an opportunity for women to re-appropriate themselves as sexual subjects. In my thesis, I have applied feminist thought to both French and British texts to illuminate the similarity of the empowering depictions of female sexuality in both countries.

The interest of this thesis has been to situate the French and British writers within a larger context, uncovering, in the process, parallelisms in the two countries. In the future, I would like to expand this comparative study even further by giving it a
wider European context, by including Spanish and Italian literature in my research on the representations of female sexuality during the period between 1850 and 1900. Spanish and Italian literary renditions of the same period, such as *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887) by realist author Benito Perez Galdós, or Leopoldo Alas “Clarín”’s *La Regenta* (1885) are some of the works which could form part of such a project.

While my work focusses on the second half of the nineteenth century, it seems that some of the questions surrounding female sexuality continue to resurface, even today. In 2011, the world was taken by storm by E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades* trilogy. More than a century after the publication of the British and French fiction my work has dealt with, issues surrounding sexuality and pleasure seem to pose very similar questions. Once again, female sexuality is at the centre of the various debates. This has brought people to question and re-evaluate the nature of female sexuality and its appropriate manifestations. Is there a similarity between this, and the introspective narratives of female desire of the fin de siècle? At a time in which sexuality and pornography are seemingly all-pervasive, the comparison is a complex one. The consumer of erotic “material” — and this ranges from, for nineteenth-century readers, pornographic books and drawings, to, for the twenty-first century person, magazines, “erotic fiction for women,” and hardcore pornography freely available online — seeks sexual gratification through his use of the aforementioned “objects.” Perhaps, nowadays, the issue is not about whether women can assert their subjectivity vis-à-vis men, but about how far they will willingly objectify themselves. While the question of choice is as important nowadays as it was then, “this choice is often one that not only endorses but celebrates female sexual commodification, sex work and pornography as vehicles of radical self-definition and personal liberation” (Heilmann, “Gender and Essentialism” 84).
In “One is not born a woman”, Monique Wittig asks:

What does “feminist” mean? […] For many […] it means someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class. For many others it means someone who fights for woman and her defence – for the myth, then, and its reinforcement. (Wittig 2017)

It would be an error to call the French male authors “feminist.” However, their representations of female sexuality, like the New Woman’s, certainly raised feminist issues of subjectivity and independence, and as such, I believe that all these literary depictions form part of the larger body of work that constitutes first-wave feminism.
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