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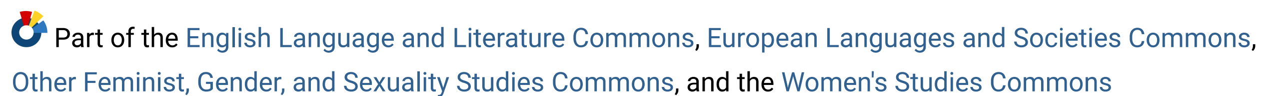
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LA FILLE PUBLIQUE:

DEPICTIONS OF SEX WORK IN FIN-DE-SIÉCLE LITERATURE

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

Portland, Maine

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts

Degree of Women and Gender Studies

&

Degree of English

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To those who have been silenced, and to those who are speaking up

Abstract

This thesis conducts a feminist analysis of depictions of sex work in *fin-de-siècle,* or turn of the 19th-century, French literature. It draws connections between literature from this time period and the social and political forces that sought to eradicate female sexual autonomy. In the introduction, the political and social setting of *fin-de-siècle* France is explored, when sex work was widely prevalant and for many women offered a route to sexual and financial autonomy that was otherwise unattainable, much to the anxiety and irritation of the patriarchal forces in place. The first chapter analyzes Emile Zola's *Nana* as a classic representation of the patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* fear of and resulting attempt to conquer feminine sexuality via the stereotyped figure of the sex worker in literature. In contrast, chapters two and three offer feminist counter-discourses that deviate from the traditional *fin-de-siècle* depictions of sexuality and protest the superficial depictions of the sex worker. Liane de Pougey's *Idylle Saphique* and Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* each offer more authentic and multi-faceted portrayals, effectively illuminating the existence of the sex worker who was so often silenced and spoken for. The concluding chapter compares this dichotomy between literature and feminine sexual autonomy of the past to the very same dynamic today in the criminalization and censorship of sex workers and the opposing sex worker activism and literature. Although literature can be a force of oppression, it can also be a medium for agency- and with forces of oppression always comes the counter-movements of the oppressed.

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Introduction

In turn of the nineteenth-century France, a sex worker[1] would be called *la fille publique.* The direct translation of the term is "the public girl." The multi-layered term adequately speaks to the conflict between genders during this time period on a level beyond just describing someone's profession. While men had the privilege of operating in the public sphere of society- working, creating laws, practicing medicine, writing literature- women were confined to their private sphere in the home, caring for children, cooking, and cleaning[2]. Sex work was one of the very few ways of life in which a woman exited her private sphere of the home, and, although widely prevalent in 19th-century France, was demonized as a force that threatened the societal structures in place.

Sex work wasn't the only profession that was demonized; it was looked down upon for women to do anything outside of their private sphere. Female writers in *fin-de-siècle*[3] France, despite major advancements in the era that preceded the *fin-de-siècle* era, were often put in the same category as sex workers. Any behavior that could be considered an expression of female autonomy, be it sexual, financial, or intellectual, was thought of as harmfully anti-social, and usually deemed to be a result of mental illness.

The male authority figures of writers, scientists and doctors controlled not just the female subjects themselves, but the depictions, literary or scientific, of their lives. This silencing of the female voice expressed the patriarchal fear of female sexuality and power. It sought to reinforce

[1] A sex worker is defined as any person who receives a profit in exchange for any consensual sexual service, whether actual sex is included or not. In contemporary terms, this includes but is not limited to prostitution (full-service sex work), stripping, sugaring, escorting, camming, phone sex operating, and creating porn. In the late nineteenth century, sex work was mainly comprised of prostitution and kept courtesans.

[2] See: Simone de Beavoir's *The Second Sex* for a more in-depth discussion of public vs. private spheres from a feminist perspective

[3] Literally translated as "end of the century," usually in regard to French culture from this time period

the authority of male figures of power manifested in authors, scientists, and doctors and maintain the oppression of female figures who were their subjects of study.

The intentional scapegoating of female sexuality in *fin-de-siècle* literature was a prevalent force which multiple scholars have noted. Scholarly feminist discourse that explores the background of *fin-de-siècle* Parisian culture, the prevalence of sex work, and the regression of women's rights due to enforced gender roles following the French Revolution indicate the connection between the demonization of feminine sexuality in literature and social and political events during this time period. By bringing a feminist analysis to this literature, the conclusion can be drawn that patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* authors use stylistic literary techniques in order to express their fear of the power of feminine sexuality and, by extension, to conquer and eradicate it, most notably in their portrayal of sex workers.

In this thesis, I analyze Émile Zola's canonical novel *Nana* as the most exemplary *fin-de-siècle* expression of the patriarchal desire to conquer the female body. Following this trend of literary depictions of the demonized prostitute come feminist counter-discourses like Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* and Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus,* both of which offer more realistic and humanistic depictions of feminine sexuality in their portrayals of *fin-de-siècle* sex work. I analyze each of these novels in contrast to Zola's *Nana,* explaining how both de Pougy and Rachilde offer a voice and existence that re-envision the attempts to silence and erase them.

This introduction provides the historical and social contexts during which these texts were written. I explore a variety of themes, including the popularity of the hysteria diagnosis and the elasticity of its symptoms. I discuss the prevalence of sex work in nineteenth century Paris and the resulting policing of female sexuality, along with the intentional erasure of the female writer. Finally, I analyze depictions of sexuality and sex work in *fin-de-siècle* literature and

science, and sex worker counter-discourse to their demonized depictions. This background information seeks to enrich the reading and analysis of my primary three texts.

Following this analytical line of thinking, my analyses of *Idylle Saphique* and *Monsieur Vénus* rely on the social location of their authors. Because the sexually liberated female voice is so consistently spoken over and warped, I found it important to take a thorough look into the lives of Liane de Pougy and Rachilde, including background information surrounding their novels in order to offer a comprehensive analysis with accurate conclusions.

Finally, in my conclusion I tie the *fin-de-siècle* silencing of the female voice and erasure of female sexuality to contemporary depictions and erasure of sex workers from a global perspective. I examine how the condemning practices of nineteenth century France are still happening today on a global scale. In her book, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor,* scholar Wendy Chapkis offers a contemporary analysis of the representations of sex workers, where she interviews dozens of sex workers and presents what they have to say in a way that is objective and unbiased. She explains that understanding the social positioning of the stories created around sex work is necessary to derive a meaningful story. She notes,

> ...we need to develop the capacity to listen to these stories without reducing them to competitors for the status of Truth. We need to listen for meaning rather than just 'fact,' to ask why a story is told in this way, how the location of the speaker shapes the tale, how the position of the audience affects what is heard, and to carefully consider what is at stake politically, personally, and strategically in invoking this particular version at this moment in this context (Chapkis 212).

The novels and medical journals of the *fin-de-siècle* era that sought to demonize the prostitute are being repeated in today's rescue industry and supposed "anti-trafficking" agendas,

which asserts that all sex workers need to be saved from themselves by force, effectively controlling the female body under the guise of saving it. My hope in this thesis is to explore how literature can contribute to erasure, yet also provide a medium for agency, thus amplifying the voice of the silenced feminine.

The regression of female autonomy and the hysteria around the hysteria diagnosis

In 17th century France, there were many advancements in free expression. Revolutionary movements were well underway for human rights and equality amongst all people. Yet, in the aftermath of the French Revolution (1789 - 1794), antiquated gender roles were enforced more strictly, alongside government control of free expression. The Napoleonic code of 1804 actively redefined women's roles by stripping women of all rights and giving men authority over their wives, as well as reintroducing colonial slavery (Mesch 5).

In the beginning of the 18th century, as a result of a decline in birth rates despite a rise in the number of marriages, the French government expressed fear of a weakened state and extinction of the French. To combat these anxieties, popular medical advice manuals were distributed to encourage traditional gender roles, asserting the importance of women being confined to the private sphere within the home, and focusing on their moral responsibilities as housewives and mothers. Scientific literature was also published, calling for a reassessment of reproductive standards and condemning the attempt to block pregnancy.

Female intellectual expression was thought by medical scientists at the time to disrupt the natural feminine cycle of pregnancy and raising children. Women were also deemed to be unable to behave logically because of their sexuality. Notable doctors of the 1800s, including Pierre Cabanis, Julien-Joseph Virey, and Pierre Roussel, all agreed upon this claim (Mesch 14). A fascination with human sexual behavior also emerged around this time, fueled by a rise in

psychological studies. The female body was consistently analyzed and quantified. This resulted in the creation of the diagnosis of hysteria.

Although hysteria has been documented to occur as a result of a number of difficult-to-define causes, with various difficult-to-define manifestations, the general definition of the affliction was attributing women's mental health issues to either a depleted or overactive sex drive, or an overuse of the mind. In her book *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle,* scholar Rachel Mesch notes,

> The fascination with female sexuality and the obsession with hysteria in the second half of the nineteenth century have been well documented by contemporary scholars of French literature. Critics such as Janet Beizer, Charles Bernherimer, Bram Diijkstra, and Jann Matlock have explored extensively the anxieties creatively projected onto nineteenth-century female bodies in medicine, art, and literature, and the social factors that precipitated this phenomenon. Historians, such as Vernon Rosario, Robert Nye, Alain Corbin, and Michelle Perrot, have further contextualized this cultural trend (Mesch 5).

As the century progressed, hysteria became more and more commonly diagnosed, and its causes and symptoms became even more varied.

Fin-de-siècle literature was rife with depictions of hysteria in its various different forms, which contributed to the hysteria around hysteria. Hysteria's fluid nature lent itself to the ability of French authors to creatively warp and mold their depictions of it to fit their literary intention. Mesch notes, "In this sense, through their mutual influence on one another's claims, literary and scientific discourse invented and produced sexuality as a construction that functioned according to certain mechanisms of power" (Mesch 10). These discourses further contributed to the

demonization of both the intellectual female figure as well as the sexually liberated female figure.

The prevalence of sex work in Paris and the policing of female sexuality

After the Revolution, the new laws that replaced those of the Ancien Régime had no mention of prostitution, suggesting that prostitution was an inevitable part of life. The Age of Enlightenment and the general culture of embracing all things that brought pleasure and thus defined Parisian culture contributed to the general acceptance of prostitution. At the end of the 18th century, prostitution was very common in Paris, with some estimates suggesting that around a quarter of women in Paris engaged in prostitution to some extent. Brothels became highly regulated and the state benefited greatly from their income, often taking 50-60% of their profits.[4] Arguably no other society has had a more prolific presence of sex work than nineteenth-century Paris.

In conjunction with the medical demonization of the female body, including scientific reports documenting empirical evidence asserting that women had smaller brains than men, scientific discourse leaned heavily towards blaming all of society's ills on prostitution. The syphilis epidemic of this period was largely blamed on prostitutes (Corbain 6). Jean-Louis Alibert published an extensive atlas of medicine which documented and analyzed syphilis. Although photos of both male and female genitalia afflicted with syphilis were portrayed in the atlas, only the faces of female syphilis patients were shown in photographs, thus reinforcing the idea of the female figure being the source of the disease (Burba 98). Many efforts were underway to study, categorize, and dismantle the field of sex work. One physician (or, called by some, a "hygienist"), Dr. Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, made it his life's goal to study,

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[4] Du Camp, Maxime (1872). "XVII: De l'état actuel de la prostitution parisienne". Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle."

categorize, and dismantle the field of sex work, launching numerous investigations and experiments in order to do so, and publishing reports of his findings in his book *De La Prostitution dans La Ville de Paris* in 1836.

This anxiety around the existence of sex workers was manifested in popular literature of the time as well, such as Victor Hugo's canonical play, *Les Misérables*, where he devotes an entire chapter to comparing prostitutes to the sewer system in Paris. As with the demonization of the female body in general, both literary and scientific forces worked together to stigmatize the existence of the prostitute. In his book *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France,* scholar Charles Bernheimer notes,

> There is no necessary break between the texts we recognize as 'literary' and those we designate officially as social, historical, political or legal. The fantasmatic dimension that we acknowledge as inherent to literary production also constitutes a generative force in the creation of public discourses that purport to have erased the traces of unconscious desire... found to display fantasies of gender and power strikingly similar to those underlying literary fictions (Bernheimer 3).

Literary discourse and scientific discourse each sought the same objective: to conquer and eradicate female sexuality, especially via the sex worker.

What is most indicative of the misogyny that was prevalent in *fin-de-siècle* discourse in reports like Parent-Duchatelet's—as well as the slew of male-authored literary works of "naturalism" about the prostitute—is the absence of the voice of the prostitute herself.[5] Bernheimer notes, "The numerous sociological studies of prostitution, Parent-Duchatelet's

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[5] Although sex workers have always existed among people of various genders, the figure of the sex worker is consistently feminized, which is a major factor in the oppression of the sex worker. (See: Juno Mac's *Revolting Prostitutes)* Thus, although I use the pronouns "they/them" when referring to sex workers in general, in accordance with current sex work discourse, I refer to the prostitute figure as "she."

included, give no voice to the women interviewed, absorbing their subjectivity into statistical tables and scientific generalizations" (Bernheimer 3). The prostitute was in fact objectified, less so by her clients than by those who studied her by confining her to statistics and figures, under the guise of being helpful.

The erasure of the female writer

Feminist literary scholars consider the nineteenth century to be a "missing" period of female-authored literature in France. Yet, prior to the nineteenth century, French female writers were actually pioneers in female-authored literature. Rachel Mesch notes,

> Beginning in the Middle Ages with Marie de France and Christine de Pisan, French women writers offered major literary contributions alongside their male counterparts. With Louise Labe and Marguerite de Nacarre during the Renaissance, Madeleine de Scudéry and Marie-Madeleine de Lafaterre in the seventeenth century, and Françoise de Graffigny, Isabelle de Charriere, and Germaine de Steael through the eighteenth century, France established early on a tradition of female authorship (Mesch 2).

This feminist progress contributed to the patriarchal fear of the French state of women gaining autonomy, exiting their private sphere,[6] and disrupting the "natural" family unit. With the social and political tides that followed the French Revolution, this once-optimistic progress was stifled by the patriarchal gender hierarchy and regressed into a silencing of the female French writer.

The act of a woman writing in France in the nineteenth century was so demonized that female writers were often compared to prostitutes. French author Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, in his widely-read essay, *Les Bas-bleus* (1873) expresses the view that women writers are products of

[6] The private sphere refers to the sociological concept of public vs. private sphere. The public sphere connotes work, government, and community and is deemed to be for men, while the private sphere connotes family, home, and housework and is deemed to be for women. See: Jurgen Habermas

moral depravity, comparable to prostitutes. In accordance with scientific literature which proclaimed that women expressing intellectual capabilities disrupted their natural and inherent status as mothers, the act of women writing was considered to be morally depraved behavior which was perceived to be unnatural, and a threat to the cohesion of the French state.

Depictions of female sexuality in patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* literature

Not only was sex work in Paris depicted in French *fin-de-siècle* literature, but it also influenced Parisian culture in such a way that literature became a vessel for the nineteenth century French patriarchy to express their fear of women gaining autonomy as well as to maintain control and power over women by depicting female sexuality as evil, diseased, and ending in inevitable pain or death. Writers like Balzac and Stendhal, writers of "Realism," portrayed a misogynistic, supposedly "realistic" depiction of life in France in the mid-nineteenth century, featuring male social and political heroes, and female characters who were weak, sentimental, and animalistic.

The female body in nineteenth-century French literature was often associated with decay, filth, disease, and death. In this sense, we can surmise that the authors' hopes, consciously or subconsciously, were to dissuade women from using their sexual power. Extending this to the figure of the prostitute in *fin-de-siècle* literature, Bernheimer notes, "the prostitute is ubiquitous in the novels and the paintings of this period not only because of her prominence as a social phenomenon but, more important, because of her function in stimulating artistic strategies to control and dispel her fantasmatic threat to male mastery" (Bernheimer 2). Male writers of the era reflected the male societal fear of the extent to which prostitution has the potential to influence otherwise untouchable figures of authority, and by extension, the patriarchal society as

a whole. Thus, the prostitute was depicted as holding major power as far as her influence on society, yet, in the most negative light possible; in the end, she always meets her painful demise.

Literary discourses of realism, naturalism, and decadence necessarily precluded any female authorial force because they are so structurally gendered. Rachel L Mesch, in her dissertation, “Gendered Discourse: French Women Writers and the Representations of Sexuality, 1880-1910,” notes, “men were in positions of authority as writers/doctors/scientists, while women were the privileged object of their analysis. Thus, the literary quest for scientific mastery in novels like *Nana* often translate into a quest to master female sexuality” (Mesch vi). Female writers, of course, did not experience the mystification and resulting fear of female sexuality, which defined the plotlines and symbolism of naturalism and decadent literature. For a woman to contribute to these genres while remaining stylistically true to the genre was quite difficult and thus, rare.

In effect, demonizing and ostracizing any woman who exhibits sexual power, or even just sexual autonomy, served to satisfy the *fin-de-siècle* fear that the patriarchal structures in place would never be dismantled. Bernheimer notes, “Most critics play down this offensive material and simply refer in passing to the pervasive misogyny of the major French nineteenth-century novelists from Balzac to Huysmans… Understanding these fantasies is crucial to understanding the generative impulses behind narrative and artistic structures in this period” (Bernheimer 4). In order to adequately analyze the three novels that I discuss in this thesis, it is essential to understand the social, political, and literary background in which they were written, and that they reflected and contributed to.

Sex worker counter-discourses to their demonized depictions

While reactionary feminist counter-discourses to *fin-de-siècle* literature is not on the forefront of scholarly review, it certainly exists and its lack of exposure speaks to the extent that the female voice was silenced. Scholars Rachel Mesch and Courtney Sullivan both analyze these works which they define as the "courtesan subgenre." Besides Liane de Pougy, who I discuss in chapter two, Valtesse la Bigne and Celeste de Chabrillan are among several other courtesans who wrote novels and achieved success sales-wise; however, none of them were taken seriously from a scholarly perspective and none besides Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* and a few of Rachilde's works have been translated into English.[7] Mesch explains, "Even though works by *demi-mondaines*[8] in the Second Empire and the Belle Epoque evoked much heated discussion in the press and sold very well for a few years, they fell into literary oblivion with the post-World War I disappearance of the demi-monde" (Mesch 16). This subgenre critiques the society which harshly judges women who fall outside of the heteronormative hierarchy,[9] or who deviate from the confines of patriarchal institutions.

These novels often depicted gender role dynamics reflecting unfair double standards of the time, where men had the agency to have sex with women with impunity, later abandoning the woman with no way to support herself and leaving her shamed and abandoned by society for having sex outside of marriage while the man is free to go on about his way. Later, when the protagonists find prostitution as a solution to supporting themselves and sometimes their

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[7] Colette was a successful female writer from the fin-de-siècle period who was arguably a sex worker, not a courtesan or prostitute, but she performed in seductive shows and also wrote about the experience of courtesans in a style that is similar to that of the courtesans themselves. Colette's work has been taken more seriously by scholars compared to other novels in this sub-genre, perhaps because she was not a true prostitute.
Rachilde was not a prostitute either but used sex work techniques to subvert the patriarchy and depicted sex work in her literature in such a way that stylistically fits within the courtesan subgenre, which I will discuss in chapter 3.

[8] *Demi-monde* is French for "half-world." *Demi-mondaines*, first used by Alexandre Dumas fils, in his play *Le Demi-Monde*, typically was used to describe courtesans and other women who participated in high society but were marked with hedonism and other qualities of unnecessary indulgence.

[9] The heteronormative hierarchy is the societal structure which empowers straight cis-gender men and oppresses all others, in proportion to how far they deviate from the "normal" standard.

children, they are treated like pariahs and are ostracized even further from their families and society. The protagonists in courtesan novels often briefly experience a romantic relationship which would have been successful, but their identity as sex workers, whether a threat from the past or a present factor, ends up dismantling the relationship in some way (Mesch 16). Courtesan authors differ from authors like Zola in that instead of painting the sex worker as inherently wrong, they critique society's direct mistreatment of women that led to their downfall and sex work as a viable solution.

Courtesan-penned novels were so copious and received so much notorious success that male authors began to pen false courtesan novels under female pseudonyms. In her book *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette,* Sullivan notes, "...the attention the courtesan novels garnered and the sales they generated unnerved some male authors so eager for publicity that they wrote phony memoirs under female pseudonyms" (Sullivan 60). Was this backlash against the courtesans by male authors vying for publicity? Or perhaps this was men wishing they could have the power the courtesans held, or perhaps queer men also caught in the repressive heteronormative hierarchy.

This thesis seeks to explore how the demonization of the prostitute is merely an extension of the demonization of the female body and her liberated use of her own body. I contribute to scholarly discussion of *fin-de-siècle* literature by exploring the forces behind it and illuminating the feminist counter-discourse it incited. I also contribute to discourse on both past and present-day sex work in a way that is missing in much scholarship on the subject: from my own perspective as a sex worker.

Nana is titled after its protagonist and claims to be an accurate portrayal of a woman like Nana, single-handedly representing all of the moral depravity of the nineteenth century.

Conversely, it is no coincidence that the titles of both *Monsieur Vénus* and *Idylle Saphique*, (Sir Venus and Idyllic Lesbian) each refer to a reenvisioned identity of the one that Zola offers. This speaks to the intention of feminist counter-discourse to speak its own truth against *fin-de-siècle* era's strictly defined roles. The voice of the sexually liberated feminine has been consistently spoken over in an attempt to erase its existence. Yet with this oppression also inevitably comes an amplification of visibility, wrought by the forces of the oppressed.

Chapter One: Nana: The *fin-de-siècle* fear, incarnated and disembodied

1. Introduction/ Literature review
2. Animalification of Nana
3. Imagery of death
4. Lack of judgment for male counterparts
5. Shaming and sexualization of gay women
6. Contradictory attributes of dumb and naive yet powerfully evil

Émile Zola's canonical novel *Nana* (1880) is part of a twenty-book series called *Les Rougon-Macquart* and is about a courtesan named Nana who is meant to represent the moral evils of excess and indulgence which marked nineteenth century Parisian culture. Yet a closer look at Zola's writing reveals a classic representation of the *fin-de-siècle* fear of the power of female sexuality and resulting literary attempt to conquer the female body.

Émile Zola is extremely well-known as "the father of naturalism." Many feminist scholars critique naturalism as being misogynistic in nature. In the literary period that Nana was written in, men were considered the only authority figures of literature, health, and science, while women were the objects of their inaccurate analysis, as discussed in Courtney Sullivan's *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette*, Rachel Mesch's *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle,* and Charles Bernheimer's *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France.* These scholarly reviews all share the opinion that *fin-de-siècle* literature classically exhibited misogynistic depictions of female sexuality as inherently evil and wrong, reflecting the patriarchal fear of women gaining both sexual and financial autonomy.

I argue that works such as *Nana* portray female sexuality as inherently evil, and the women who possess it as dumb, ignorant, and duplicitous, in an attempt to confine the female figure to her private sphere. Some scholars have a more neutral opinion of Zola's *Nana*,

acknowledging that it is misogynistic but interpreting it to be a metaphor or reflection of nineteenth century culture more than an intentional control of women. Peter V. Conroy Jr., in his article, "The Metaphorical Web in Zola's *'Nana*,'" argues that Nana is a mythical figure, and that Zola intended Nana to be a metaphor instead of a realistic figure, despite Zola's genre of naturalism and claims to represent reality. He cites Zola's frequent animalization of Nana as evidence. Similarly, Steven McLean's, "'The Golden Fly': Darwinism and Degeneration in Émile Zola's *'Nana'*" also emphasizes Nana's animality; he contends that Zola's characterization of Nana exemplifies female degeneracy, yet from the perspective of putting the blame on male lust. He argues that Zola fits Nana into Darwin's theory of sexuality as being inherently animalistic.

Some scholars view Zola's characterization of Nana as that of a feminist figure. Bernice Chitnis, in her book *Reflecting on Nana*, claims that Nana's character is a feminist figure who overturns the patriarchy, as indicated by her control of the men in her life. I argue that while it may be true that Nana's character dismantles the patriarchal society to which she belonged, based on Zola's depictions of Nana's negative traits and her gruesome death, Zola's intention was to portray her as a flawed and evil woman, not as a feminist hero.

Noemie I. Parrot agrees that *Nana* reflects misogynistic views in her dissertation, "Zola's Woman as Unnatural Animal," where she examines Zola's portrayal of his female characters as animals, thus indicating his view of women as sub-human, especially those who express sexual autonomy. She makes the point that despite Zola's claims to portray humanity from a scientifically natural standpoint, if we are to compare his male characters with their female counterparts and their degrading portrayals, a contradiction in his claim is evident, indicating the misogynistic culture of his time. Audrey Burba also shares this idea. In her dissertation, "Dying

in Detail: Feminine Death and the Question of Authorship in nineteenth Century French Fiction," she explores how the *fin-de-siècle* portrayal of female death indicates a desire to conquer female sexuality in order to prevent it from dismantling the patriarchal structures in place.

Finally, Rachel Mesch's *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle,* and Chantal Bertrand-Jennings' "Zola's Women: The Case of a Victorian 'Naturalist'" offer feminist analyses of *Nana.* They claim that the novel exemplifies the misogyny and homophobia that is inherent in naturalism by demonizing sexuality that falls outside of the heteronormative sexual hierarchy, and oppressing and objectifying women on the basis of science. Mesch notes, "Zola's novel offers a fascinating example of the nineteenth century tension between the male mind and the female body" (Mesch 26). She adds, "It follows quite simply that if female sexuality is the originary wound, then female sexuality must be mastered, dominated, and controlled, a task not unfamiliar to the late nineteenth century writer and scientist" (Mesch 30). By analyzing Nana's death, the reader absorbs the message that the evil sexuality she represented was conquered.

The most fascinating anti-Zola feminist rhetoric comes from Chantal Bertrand-Jennings in her scholarly article "Zola's Women:The Case of a Victorian 'Naturalist.'" In the article Bertrand-Jennings states that despite Zola's progressive anti-religious rhetoric (calling the church "a bastion of sexual puritanism and of misogyny"), his calls for female liberation, and his outspoken discourse on behalf of the working class, his portrayal of female characters in his novels indicate that in fact, Zola does not want to dismantle religious constructs to liberate women, but wants to be the ruler of women himself. She explains, "If Zola shared with the Catholic Church so many of its beliefs concerning women and sexuality, why then his well-known aggressiveness against religion?... In fact, it is the role of Messiah which seems to be

at stake; and Zola's struggle with the Church is one of rivalry over the domination of women" (Bertrand-Jennings 31). I share Bertrand-Jennings' opinion on Zola, based on analysis of the depiction of female sexuality in his literature, which I explain in detail in this chapter. By analyzing depictions of general fear and anxiety expressed by male figures around the power of female sexuality, and the resulting conquering of women who express such sexual power, it can be concluded that Zola is representing the patriarchal desire to be in control of women, similar to the Catholic church. "The masculine character- and Zola it would seem..." are in fear of the grip of power they find themselves in while controlled by feminine sexuality. "They then project these feelings onto women, whom they see as devouring lustful monsters. Thus, probably in an attempt to absolve a deep-seated guilt, Zola shows his female characters as tempters and initiators in matters of sex or love, even when they are young and 'innocent'" (Bertrand-Jennings). Zola is akin to the man who walks into a strip club, stares at naked performing women without tipping them, asks them how they are willing to degrade themselves in such a way, then offers them a better life away from the strip club, where they don't have to work in exchange for being his girlfriend. Or the anti-trafficking task forces, who claim to want to "save" women from sex work, yet support harsh criminalization despite countless studies indicating that criminalization of sex work causes violence, as I discuss in the conclusion.

Zola's *Nana* is exemplative of the male authority's fear of the power of female sexuality and the resulting attempt to stigmatize and eradicate it. By analyzing the animalification of Nana, imagery of death, lack of judgment of *Nana*'s male characters, concurrent shaming and sexualization of gay women, and Nana's contradictory attributes as both naive and dumb yet powerful and evil, we can conclude that Zola sought to threaten those women who exited their private spheres.

The animalification of Nana

Throughout the novel, Zola intentionally describes the smell of Nana as both intoxicating and nauseating and compares her to various animals. These literary devices serve to reinforce Nana's identity as sub-human and to indicate that female sexuality is dirty, animalistic, and harmful, echoing the patriarchal sentiment of *fin-de-siècle* literature. Bertrand-Jennings explains, "In the novel there are numerous animal metaphors qualifying the heroine, as well as images of dirtiness, stifling narrowness and suffocating and foul-smelling heat which stigmatize the places associated with her, such as her bed, her bed-chamber, her dressing room, etc. The reactions of fear and fascinated repulsion with regard to femininity are thus made evident" (Bertrand-Jennings 30). It is clear through Zola's depiction of Nana that her sexuality is thought to be inherently harmful. Despite the many men who are romantically obsessed with Nana to the point of draining their fortunes to purchase her attention and company, Zola depicts her sexuality as gross.

Nana is also variously compared to a number of different animals. She is described as a "tart with the insatiable tastes of a parakeet" (Zola 368), behaving, "kittenishly with him" (Zola 370), a "fly that had come from the dungheap of the slums" (Zola 221), "a bitch followed by a pack of dogs" (Zola iv), a "prized horse," who was named after Nana, who cheers for the horse passionately and mimics its galloping movements during the famous Longchamp Race (Zola 374). With the exception of flies, which are associated with disease and death, these animal descriptions are all significant in that they are animals that humans keep as pets: man controls them to his will. These metaphors seek to demean Nana and reinforce her identity as an animalistic sexual woman. Audrey Burba, in her article, "Dying in Detail: Feminine Death and the Question of Authorship in nineteenth Century French Fiction," notes "part of Zola's intent in

the creation of these associations is their role in characterizing Nana as nothing more than a sexual animal" (Burba 76). If Zola claims to portray humanity in its natural form, one must surmise that Zola's opinion of women in their natural form is animalistic if they fall outside of society's depiction of a subservient, submissive, and sexless woman.

One of the most famous scenes in *Nana* is when Muffat is at Nana's house, discussing a cruel article that the journalist Fauchery had written about her. Yet, Nana appears to not care and continues to dance naked in front of her mirror, admiring her reflection. Muffat is brought to the crushing revelation that this woman he is in love with is more beast than childlike nymph, as he had previously thought.:

> He thought of his old dread of Woman, of the Beast of the Scriptures, at once lewd and wild. Nana was all covered with fine hair; a russet made her body velvety, while the Beast was apparent in the almost equine development of her flanks, in the fleshy exuberances and deep hollows of her body, which lent her sex the mystery and suggestiveness lurking in their shadows. She was, indeed, that Golden Creature, blind as brute force, whose very odor ruined the world. Muffat gazed and gazed as a man possessed, till at last, when he had shut his eyes in order to escape it, the Brute reappeared in the darkness of the brain, larger, more terrible, more suggestive in its attitude. Now, he understood, it would remain before his eyes, in his very flesh, forever. (Zola 225)

Muffat's crushed and dramatic reaction speaks volumes to the fear of the mystery of the female sex. In an attempt to keep her in the *fin-de-siècle* box of naive woman, she must be read as being "blind as brute force" to her power. Of course, women could not be aware of the power their sex holds, or aware of anything really. When Muffat tries to erase the image in actuality, it

reappears much more powerfully in fantasy. This style of writing exemplifies the *fin-de-siecle* way of depicting female sexuality as mysteriously animalistic and evil. Zola is speaking to the male authorititative forces who study the female subject and cannot fully explain the female sex, much less control it- thus deeming it to be very dangerous. Mesch notes, "Viewed in this light, *Nana* can be read as a discursive struggle between a male writer and the fantasmatic demon he is attempting to master" (Mesch 26). In effect, Zola has extended his animal metaphor to be monstrous: Nana's sexuality has become a mythical dangerous creature, haunting the minds of the male *fin-de-siècle*.

Zola's use of animalification and descriptions of strong odors is also meant to connote disease. Rachel Mesch notes, "Nana's sex is the serious wound poisoning society. As Nana brings the filth of the underworld to infect the bourgeoisie, the female sex is implicated as the organism that disrupts social equilibrium by transgressing class boundaries and thus facilitating the virus' path of ruin" (Mesch 29). In one scene, Nana is at a party when the familiar waltz which Nana had performed to in *La Blonde Vénus* begins to play. The book narrates, "in this house, where a vast accumulation of wealth was suddenly about to go up in flames and collapse in ruins, the knell of this ancient family was being tolled with a waltz, while poised over the dancers, loose-limbed and invisible, with the smell of her body fermenting in the stuffy air, Nana was turning this whole society putrid to the rhythm of her vulgar tune" (Zola 364). Nana's body is affecting the entire air of the party with its smell, and putrefying society with her vulgarity.

Another interesting point to explore in regards to Nana's animalification is a contradiction in Nana's portrayal. Nana's sexuality is consistently depicted as animalistic and unable to be tamed; yet, when Nana gets pregnant, many of the characters, including Nana herself are shocked, despite the fact that the book has no mention of Nana using birth control and

despite the fact that she has sex with many different men. Audrey Burba explains, "The fact that the *femme fatale* does not experience maternity despite her numerous sexual relations is in total contradiction with her being compared to the animal. Unless they are infertile, these *fatale* women use a method of birth control" (Burba 166). Burba believes that the book entirely leaves out the idea of birth control, "so as not to make these *femme fatales* rational beings. It seems thus that these female protagonists are neither animal nor human but rather in-between the two in this manner" (Burba 166). If Zola were to show the reader a rational and practical behavior of the courtesan, it would shatter the *fin-de-siècle* fantasy of the courtesan being a sex-ravaged, animalistic nymphomaniac, devoid of all logic and reason because the only thing on her mind is sex. Despite Zola's claim to portray scientifically accurate depictions, his intentional exclusion of birth control methods indicates a fear of acknowledging female sexuality, and the decision to choose fantasy over reality.

Imagery of Death

> She alone was left standing, amid the accumulated riches of her mansion, while a host of men lay stricken at her feet. Like those monsters of ancient times whose fearful domains were covered with skeletons, she rested her feet on human skulls and was surrounded by catastrophes...The fly that had come from the dungheap of the slums, carrying the ferment of social decay, had poisoned all these men simply by alighting on them. It was fitting and just. She had avenged the beggars and outcasts of her world. And while, as it were, her sex rose in a halo of glory and blazed down on her prostrate victims like a rising sun shining down on a field of carnage, she remained as unconscious of her actions as a splendid animal, ignorant of the havoc she had wreaked, and as good-natured as ever.

Zola, 221

Throughout the novel are copious images of death connected to Nana. By consistently linking Nana to death, Zola indicates both that she is sub-human, and that she is the cause of death in herself and others. Bertrand-Jennings explains that female characters in Zola's novels are "infamous nymphomaniacs [who] exercise the most pernicious influence on men… Perverted to the marrow of their bones, they soil, debase, ruin, destroy, and kill everything around them, leaving in their wake ashes and death. Nana, needless to say, is the most efficient of all these she-demons, and the easily identifiable imagery of gluttony is used to delineate her behavior. In a kind of sexual cannibalism, she massacres her lovers or causes their deaths indirectly" (Berntrand-Jennings 29). The ruthless female monster who destroys men with sex appeal appears to be the recurring villain of *fin-de-siècle* literature. Zola effectively caricatures them to indicate how dangerous women who step outside of their private spheres can be. And, after causing such destruction, they must in turn be destroyed themselves.

The gruesome portrayal of the death of female characters indicates the desire of nineteenth-century French authors like Zola to conquer the feminine form. As romanticism gives way to naturalism, the female death is no longer idolized in a beautiful and romantic sense. It takes an opposite turn and instead features details such as, "an oozy mass of discarded flesh" (Zola 425). In contrast with the disgusting female death scenes, Burba notes that "a beautiful death was understood to be an aesthetic experience which belonged only to men" (Burba 9). This style of authoring female death was intentional, because men of the same demographic did not endure the same humiliating and horrific deaths. Instead, they enjoyed the beautiful and honorary deaths more common for both genders during the preceding Romantic period.

From this, we are left to conclude that this intentional revisioning of the female death scene was a patriarchal attempt to control the female body- or perhaps even a threat to keep women in line. The male, sensing the political and social forces of female empowerment, expresses his fear and anxiety in his writing of female sexuality. He then is able to achieve ultimate control over the female body by authoring her death. The reader receives connotations that express that these women got what they deserve, since their deaths are described in such degrading and humiliating terms.

Nana not only has a classically *fin-de-siècle* degrading death of her own, but she is often associated with causing death throughout the novel. For example, when Count Muffat finds Nana with Marquis de Chouard in Nana's bed, wearing Muffat's nightshirt, he is filled with dread at seeing Nana, who he had thought was loyal to him, with another man, wearing his own nightshirt. He thinks, "A limp rag, rotten with decay from sixty years of debauchery, he looked like a death's head at this feast celebrating Nana's all-conquering flesh" (401). Not only do we receive connotations of death in the descriptions of Nana's "all-conquering flesh," but Zola also explicitly describes de Chouard's head as appearing like death. From this, the reader infers that Nana causes death; like the fear of syphilis that plagued the *fin-de-siècle* era and was largely blamed on prostitutes, Nana appears to have transmitted death onto de Chauard via her sex.

It is worth exploring Nana's cause of death, which was smallpox, and its connection to syphilis. In French, the two sound nearly the same and in fact, in make-up, are very similar. Burba explains, "Zola picked the perfect illness for Nana by killing her off, officially, with smallpox (la petite verole), since it easily suggests its big sister syphilis (la grande verole)." If Nana had contracted syphilis, her death would have been much slower, making for a much less dramatic ending. Burba continues, "Undoubtably Zola intended for the two illnesses to overlap;

one destroyed the face, one destroyed the sex" (Burba 98). Syphilis was largely blamed on prostitutes in nineteenth century France; medical books depicting syphilis symptoms showed photos of women, but no men. Despite the fact that a sex act with a transmitted STD requires two people, the prevalence of syphilis was linked to prostitutes.

Finally, the death of Nana herself is the most clear indication of Zola's intentional connotation of feminine sexuality and death when he kills her off in a shamefully gruesome death: "Now Nana was left alone, lying face upwards in the light of the candle, a pile of blood and pus dumped on a pillow, a shovelful of rotten flesh ready for the bone-yard, her whole face covered in festering sores, one touching the other, all pickered and subsiding into a shapeless, slushy grey pulp, already looking like a compost heap" (Zola 425). Nana the prostitute dies the gruesome death she deserves. From this, we establish that Nana's death was one that she had coming. Jennings comments, "In due time, the horrible, early putrefaction of the courtesan's body succeeds in exorcizing the menace she represents for the male imagination. These female characters must indeed be punished for the male order to be preserved" (Bertrand-Jennings, 29) By dying Nana off with a disease that is painful, disgusting, and linked to a sexually transmitted disease, the reader is left to infer that prostitutes typically die these types of deaths. By describing her death with such horrific imagery, we as a reader get the righteous sense that this was what Nana deserved.

Nana's power is deemed to be too dangerous to continue existing. Nana, "threatens [Zola's] own authority as a writer and scientist. For his narrative to succeed as a step toward scientific mastery, he must rid it of this threat and bring his heroine to her unequivocal end to re-empower the discourse that her existence had challenged" (Mesch 26). From this, we are left to conclude that this intentional revisioning of the female death scene is a patriarchal threat. The

male, sensing the political and social forces of female empowerment, expresses his fear and anxiety in his writing of female sexuality. He then is able to express ultimate control over the female body by authoring her death. The reader receives connotations that express that these women got what they deserve, since their deaths are described in such degrading and humiliating terms.

On the other hand, the male characters in the novel who are Nana's clients enjoy beautifully tragic deaths, like in a barn gone down in flames surrounded by horses, and a noble suicide by scissors which leaves a stain in Nana's carpet. The gruesome female death scene is a classic stylistic feature of *fin-de-siècle* literature and clearly expressed in *Nana.* Nana's death is intended to indicate to the reader that Nana got what she deserved. In analyzing Nana's association with sex, death, decay, and destruction, we can conclude that Zola was expressing the sentiment that Nana's sexuality was rooted in evil, and that she needed to be destroyed violently in order for society to function peacefully.

The hypocritical lack of judgment of her male counterparts' vices

Besides the dichotomy between Nana's death scene and those of her male counterparts, there are a variety of other double standards in the novel as well. While Nana and other women in the novel are torn apart from their vices, the men are allowed to act with just as low moral implications or worse, yet with impunity. It appears, then, that Zola's depiction of women intends to show that women are inherently unwell. Bertrand-Jennings explains, "To be a woman is also to be ill, mentally or physically, in Zola' s fiction , for criteria of health are implicitly male and not to be male is not to be well" (Bertrand-Jennings 28). Zola's conception of woman as other and inherently wrong is indicated in the lack of impunity of her male counterparts' vices while Nana is so harshly judged.

For example, when Count Muffat, the sexually stunted Catholic, meets Nana for the first time, he is overtaken with her sexuality, and thus, her power over him. Observing Nana, he notes, "Her bosom, which seemed swollen with many vices..." (Zola 189). Muffat connects "her bosom," a part of Nana's body, inherently with vice. He believes he can determine her vice through looking at her body. This reflects the *fin-de-siècle* belief that one's emotional or mental state could be determined by analyzing their physical characteristics and that the female body was rooted with destruction. This concept is often depicted in naturalist literature. When the topic of Muffat's morality came up in conversation with Nana, she glanced at him in such a way that made Muffat feel "a keen twinge of annoyance…. He could have struck her…." (Zola 190). While Muffat feels free to judge Nana based on her body, when the question of his own vice or virtue is addressed, Muffat feels self-conscious. In reaction to his self-consciousness, his instinct is to beat Nana. While unfairly judging Nana to be full of vice because of her body, Muffat is simultaneously considering causing physical violence against her because of the embarrassment he felt in her presence.

In another example, Fontan hits Nana in the face for expressing annoyance at his getting crumbs into their bed continuously. He then punches Nana in the ear. Nana reflects, "It was cowardly of him to take advantage of his superior strength! She had experienced very real terror all the same, so terrible had that quaint mask of Fontan's become. And her anger began dwindling down as though the blow had calmed her. She began to feel respect toward him and accordingly squeezed herself against the wall in order to leave him as much room as possible. She even ended by going to sleep, her cheek tingling, her eyes full of tears and feeling so deliciously depressed and wearied and submissive that she no longer noticed the crumbs. When she woke up in the morning she was holding Fontain in her naked arms and pressing him tightly

against her breast" (Zola 240). Zola writes that the punch had the effect of calming Nana, and even making her feel respect for Fontain. It induces her sleep, and in the morning she no longer notices the crumbs. She even feels such affection for Fontain that she holds him in her arms and presses him against her breast. This speaks so much to complete submission: Would anyone actually have this reaction? Perhaps in action, but certainly not in internal dialogue, with words like "deliciously." In this passage, Zola is making the comment that physical violence against women is an effective means to not only keep them in line to make them behave as he wants, but even makes them feel genuinely content, loving, and affectionate. It is through Nana's unrealistic reaction of contentedness that we as readers can infer that Zola indicates that violence against women is useful and justifiable.

Meanwhile, the men in Nana are accepted has having voracious sexual appetites, yet when Nana and other female characters express the same sentiment, they are demonized. For example, when Nana is out with her lover and coworker Satin, they reminisce on their early days of whoring and debauchery with cavalier attitudes, saying, "I certainly had more fun when I hadn't got a penny." Zola narrates, "They were subject to these sudden spells of gossiping when they felt the urge to go back to their squalid early years! And it was always when men were present, as though they felt the need to rub their noses in the filth of their unsavory past. The men had gone rather pale, and looked embarrassed. The Hugon brothers were trying to laugh it off, while Vandoeuvres was stroking his beard and Muffat was looking more and more solemn" (Zola 294). Male characters in *Nana* insist on being the conquerors as well as the saviors; and so only want to hear of the prostitutes hating the work, and then loving to be "saved" by the rich men. When Nana and Satin act authentically, or with the same attitude as the men, they are depicted as being completely out of line and morally debased. Echoing feminist scholar Simone de

Beauvoir's concept of the societally created Eternal Feminine, or what it means to be feminine, this concept of Woman as Other is illuminated in Nana, in that it speaks to the male ego, and how it has created this concept of the female figure and how women are expected to act in order to satisfy the male ego. Since the way women are expected to act is not inherently how they are, and is in fact a male-created concept which benefits men, when they act outside of this, they are depicted as wrong and evil. Zola and the patriarchy of the *fin-de-siècle* preferred their women to be modest and naive; if they were to engage in sex, they should be ashamed of it. Bertrand-Jennings explains, "Even when they are not specifically rebelling against men's rules, the female characters in Zola's novels most often embody fertility and are therefore judged negatively, for their contact is perceived as a sordid entrapment in materiality, which provokes uneasiness, repulsion, anxiety, or outright flight in the male characters" (Bertrand-Jennings 28). While the male authority figures have the right and autonomy to sexualize and demean women, when they perceive women to be freely sexual of their own accord or to act in any way other than the attempt to be virginal and innocent, it is unsavory, and the men become uncomfortable. Not only does this express a double standard, but it reinforces the strict gender roles of male as conqueror and female as conquered.

Finally, Nana's death scene compared with the deaths of her male counterparts is also worth analyzing. By describing her death with such horrific imagery, we as a reader get the righteous sense that this was what Nana deserved. On the other hand, the male characters in the novel who are Nana's clients are depicted as having been lured in by Nana's powerful and poisonous sexuality and die more poetically beautiful deaths. The rest are assumed to become free of Nana's grip after her death.

Shaming and sexualization of gay women

Zola's depictions of homosexuality in *Nana* comment upon homosexuality as being linked to the evil sexuality that Nana inhabits, falling outside of the heteronormative hierarchy; in other words, any expression of sexuality that wasn't man possessing women was wrong, harmful, and rooted in evil. Yet, noting the privilege in this ideology, nineteenth century depictions of lesbianism were critically condemning, yet also pornographic; the reader was meant to morally judge them but also enjoy sexualizing them.

After a night out, Nana and her lover, Satin, make it to Nana's house after a night out together, and are relieved to be home and ready to head to bed. Chapter seven concludes with a scene between Nana and Satin, her lover, and fellow courtesan.

> The heaped–up wealth of the place, the Old World furniture, the fabrics of silk and gold, the ivory, the bronzes, were slumbering in the rosy light of the lamps, while from the whole of the silent house a rich feeling of great luxury ascended, the luxury of the solemn reception rooms, of the comfortable, ample dining room, of the vast retired staircase, with their soft carpets and seats. Her individuality, with its longing for domination and enjoyment and its desire to possess everything that she might destroy everything, was suddenly increased. Never before had she felt so profoundly the puissance of her sex. (Zola 303)

Zola then ends the final paragraph with Satin lounging on a bearskin rug and urging Nana to come to bed. In this quote, Zola paints the scene as being luxurious and sensual, yet based in evil and destruction. Nana and Satin's relationship is intentionally painted as a nefarious pairing intent on their plan to "destroy everything." In this way, Zola ties the inherent evil of feminine sexuality with Nana's homosexuality. Interestingly, "longing for domination" and a "desire to possess everything" are traits that can be inextricably associated with the male existence,

especially of the fin-de-siècle era; yet, when female characters express ambition and actually succeed, the male author (or authority figure) paints them in a harshly negative light.

Meanwhile, Muffat states that he doesn't mind Nana's cheating on him with Satin because, "He'd taken Satin as a joke" (Zola 299). Despite Nana's spending most of her time with Satin, Muffat does not take their relationship seriously. Lesbian relationships were depicted as being only an expression of perverse sexuality.

In studies of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century, it was found that most were queer. Burba cites nineteenth century sexologists Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds interpretation, quoting, "these relations [with men] are of a professional character, and as the business element becomes emphasized the possibility of sexual satisfaction diminishes" (Ellis and Symonds). Burba adds, "Besides a lack of satisfaction, prostitutes needed other types of sexual behaviors to feel fulfillment" (Burba). Echoing the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with explaining non-traditional sexuality as being rooted in malfunction, Ellis and Symonds and Burba conclude that it is charging money for sexual services that causes female sex workers to seek out lesbian relationships since they can no longer find fulfillment through heterosexual sex. Yet, this theory has homophobic leanings because it suggests that one can become gay as a result of a lack of satisfaction in heterosexual sex. As a sex worker myself who is queer and who has met hundreds of other sex workers, I can attest that the majority of sex workers are on some level queer. Yet it is not that sex work made us this way, but the opposite: we were drawn to sex work because of being queer. Both sex workers and queer people are often more sexually and romantically open. They are able to express an identity that is shunned by society as sex workers, and thus have more emotional mobility to express their queerness.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, courtesan and author Liane de Pougy offers a different perspective as well; de Pougy comments upon the impossibility of existing as a queer woman in the nineteenth century. The main character in *Idylle Saphique* expressed one of the very few ways that women in nineteenth century France could be financially independent, and thus eliminated her need to marry a man in order to survive financially. This brings us to the conclusion that perhaps the reason why so many sex workers were queer goes in the opposite direction that Burba, Ellis and Symonds (and the general *fin-de-siècle* attitude) suggest: the courtesans were lesbian before becoming courtesans; they were more drawn to this career because they did not want to marry men.

Towards the end of the novel, Satin dies from a sexually transmitted disease that she contracted from Mme. Robert, a woman she was having an affair with. This leaves the reader to infer that gayness is a sin, and leads its participants to their death, which they deserve for participating in such sin. To be queer and to be a sex worker were, separately, identities that left one discriminated against at best and subject to violence at worst; if one is already a member of one group, one doesn't have much to lose in terms of society's acceptance when they are openly a member of the other group.

Contradictory dichotomy of dumb and naive yet powerfully evil

How can someone so naive and powerless manage to cause so much destruction and despair? Only a woman in *fin-de-siècle* literature. Instead of meeting his naturalist intention of depicting authentic humanity, Zola instead portrays a misogynistic standpoint of the contradictory naïve victim/society-ruining whore, while allowing his male characters to have a fuller range of moral depth and implications. Zola pigeonholes women into the stereotype of being adored by several men to the point of draining their bank accounts, yet also describes them

as ugly and disgusting. Mesch notes, "The extent of Nana's subjective awareness of her actions and of the power of her sexuality is one of the most enigmatic aspects of the novel. Is she a *femme fatale*, as she appears in her salon, conscious of the 'power of her sex'? Or is she an innocent *bonne fille*, childlike and ignorant of her power?" (Mesch 36) They're portrayed as naïve victims of their environment yet with the ability to dismantle an entire city in France. Zola posits these supposed truths to be his observations of the natural world, a stylistic feature of naturalism. But if we analyze the lack of logic in the depiction of Nana, despite the amount of research Zola did for the novel*,* we can conclude that these blatant contradictions are simply tools to control and oppress the feminine figure.

Returning to the scene when Nana is dancing in front of a mirror, the reader can find even more to unpack. Nana dances in front of a mirror in her home, admiring her reflection, while Muffat discusses a scathingly negative article written by Fauchery about Nana, describing her moral degeneracy and claiming that she has single-handedly dismantled all of Paris. Nana is seemingly oblivious to what the article is saying, or the extent of its accusations. Zola focuses on how much Nana is completely oblivious to the mean article Fauchery wrote about her. In this scene, Zola intends to make the comment that Nana is dumb and naive. But could it be possible that her passive receipt would be one of survival? When a woman's character was attacked during the *fin-de-siècle* era, they did not have the autonomy to really fight back. It would be easier and more logical for them to ignore cruel and insulting news articles about them. This reaction, while in fact more logical and humanlike, makes her into a monster in *fin-de-siècle* literature.

Muffat is disturbed by Nana's cavalier attitude which contradicts the *fin-de-siècle* imaginary of women being overly emotional, sensitive, and childlike. He muses, "She was,

indeed, that Golden Creature, blind as brute force, whose very odor ruined the world. Muffat gazed and gazed as a man possessed, till at last, when he had shut his eyes in order to escape it, the Brute reappeared in the darkness of the brain, larger, more terrible, more suggestive in its attitude. Now, he understood, it would remain before his eyes, in his very flesh, forever" (Zola 225). This extremely dramatic response speaks to the fear and repulsion men experienced when women acted outside of the box that the patriarchy had put them in. Although Muffat is so romantically obsessed with Nana, that he expresses that he "felt that he was hers utterly: he would have abjured everything, sold everything, to possess her for a single hour that very night," (Zola 231), when she acts differently from how he wants her to act, she is described as unattractive, beast-like, and with an odor that ruins the world.

What's more, seeing a woman's delight in her own body was considered negative. Since female sexuality is a sin, the women in Zola's world ought to feel ashamed of their bodies. To be delighted by it is an entire other level of horrific evil. "The mirror that enables Nana's pleasure dramatically reinforces the exclusion of masculine desire from Nana's sexuality. There is no room to imagine any mechanism of her arousal other than her own reflection. Furthermore, by examining herself in the mirror while Muffat looks on, Nana reveals her control over the scope of the male gaze. The mirror cuts off the man's view, allowing Nana to frame herself" (Mesch 32). In this scene, not only is Nana simultaneously immune to criticism intended to be painful, but she is also celebrating herself and her body, the female body which was so inherently wrong and rooted in malfunction, as cited by nineteenth century medical literature. This complete refusal to conform makes her evil.

In another scene, Nana is reading a novel about a courtesan and condemns the book, saying that books should be more sentimental and uplifting. Zola narrates,

> She also expressed indignation and revulsion at the sort of filth that claimed to give a true picture of life. As if you could put everything into a book, as if a novel should be written for any reason but a reader's entertainment! Nana held very firm views on books and drama; novels should be full of sentiment and high principles, uplifting, something to make you dream! (Zola 298)

While some critics interpret this to be Zola acknowledging his lack of comprehensive knowledge about the life of the courtesan, I argue that this is in fact Zola anticipating backlash from courtesans, and his planned defense: if any courtesans protest the validity of his depictions of them, it is because they cannot accept reality; they only like books that are "full of sentiment and high principles, uplifting, something to make you dream!" In this scene, Zola paints Nana as the stereotypical idealistic and romantic woman of the *fin-de-siècle* period: she is unable to handle his accurate naturalist style of writing.

For a woman who has endured quite a substantial amount of trauma, Nana is depicted in the novel within the novel scene as unrealistically idealistic and romantic. What's more, considering the need for successful courtesans to be adept at connecting with clients on an emotional level, and to read and respond to their need for validation, she is depicted as entirely lacking in emotional depth. This is contradictory and unrealistic, and indicates Zola's agenda to demonize the courtesans that Nana represented. Mesch provides background information which supports my claim, noting "In preparing for his novel, he researched and interviewed several famous courtesans. Yet the one detail he most blatantly ignores about these women, is their intelligence, the sharpness necessary to succeed in this competitive domain" (Mesch 36). Could it be possible that Zola completely missed the emotional perceptiveness and intelligence necessary to be successful as a courtesan, and the theoretical nature of the skills and traits

necessary to accomplish such feats of intrigue, manipulation, and sales techniques, even after interviewing several of them? Whether Zola intentionally depicted a false representation of the courtesan in *Nana*, or whether he was so influenced by scientific medical discourse of the era that it blinded his accuracy, it is clear that *fin-de-siècle* works like *Nana* satisfied the male desire to conquer that mysterious feminine force which, when sparked, temporarily robbed them of their usual power and control.

The book scene is significant in that it represents the *fin-de-siècle* control of the female existence as well as her story. The male authority figures of writers, scientists and doctors controlled not just their female subjects themselves, but the depictions, literary or scientific, of their lives. This silencing of the female voice expressed the fear of female sexuality and power, and the desire to eradicate them. In the next two novels that I analyze, each author portrays a "novel within the novel" scene similar to the one Nana comments upon, but from a revisioned, feminist standpoint. They appear to be rewriting the existence that was written over them.

Chapter Two: *Idylle Saphique,*[10] or,

Idyllic Lesbian: The Famous Courtesan's Autobiographical Novel

1) Introduction and literature review
2) The emotional toll and physical danger of being a courtesan
3) Job requirements: Intelligent, emotionally aware, and tenacious
4) Queer visibility
5) Autobiographical ending

Introduction:

Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* is an example of the feminist counter-discourse that followed Émile Zola's *Nana.* Written in 1901, the novel offers a more dynamic depiction of sex work and courtesan life, and negates the binary depictions which typically defined *fin-de-siècle* literature. It portrays sex workers in a more positive and compassionate light, showing the qualities necessary to be successful as a courtesan, while also depicting the trauma they endured. *Idylle Saphique* is an autobiographical novel which comments upon the difficulty of existing as a queer woman during de Pougy's time period. The novel's title directly translates to "Idyllic Lesbian." Although Graham Anderson's 2021 English translation is titled, *A Woman's Affair*, the French title is more adept at summarizing what de Pougy intends to comment upon in the novel: the picturesque life of a highly privileged lesbian woman in the *fin-de-siècle* era, which came with its own set of advantages and difficulties.

Liane de Pougy was a famous *demi-monde* courtesan as well as a philanthropist and writer. Much has actually been written about Liane de Pougy; yet, most of it is about her scandalous life as a courtesan more so than her talent as a writer or her volunteer work. She was a prime figure of the *fin-de-siècle demi-monde* and had achieved celebrity status.

[10] The 2021 English version, translated by Graham Anderson, is called *A Women's Affair*; "Idylle Saphique," however, directly translates to "Idyllic Lesbian."

De Pougy was born in 1869 in La Fleche, France. She was enrolled in convent education until the age of 16 when she got pregnant by, and subsequently married, a naval officer. Her husband was emotionally and physically abusive, so de Pougy ended up fleeing the home, leaving her son with his paternal grandparents. She moved to Paris and began prostituting: the path taken by hundreds of thousands of other women during the 18th and nineteenth centuries in Europe, and a path which often defines the plotlines of the courtesan subgenre to which de Pougy would later contribute to (Anderson 3). Sullivan explains, "Often through no fault of their own, de Pougy's protagonists 'fall' into prostitution and come to understand they are pariahs trying to earn a decent living in a society that has cast them out since their method of supporting themselves has put them at odds with patriarchal bourgeois ideology" (43 Sullivan). De Pougy's works, especially *Idylle Saphique*, were largely autobiographical, thus creating a strong counter-discourse to *fin-de-siècle* works of literature as well as scientific medical literature about prostitutes, both of which claimed to accurately depict prostitutes yet without offering them an actual voice. Books like de Pougy's also turned demonizing depictions of prostitutes on their head by pointing out society's double standards which led women to become impoverished, then ostracized them for making a living through sex work.

While de Pougy endured a difficult beginning like many of the other Paris transplants who became sex workers, she eventually rose to huge success and existed in the top percentiles of wealth in France. She was a celebrity in not just the Parisian *demi-monde* but internationally, with her photo printed on French postcards and cigarette boxes, posters advertised her performances at the Folies Bergère and her romantic life was often discussed in journals such as the *Gil Blas* in her earlier years of fame.

Later, de Pougy became a columnist for the *Gil Blas,* and the literary periodical published several of her novels; de Pougy sought to publish *Idylle Saphique* with them, but they refused out of fear of legal repercussions because of the scandalous content. While lesbian literature written by lesbian women had already been largely circulated in print, because *Idylle Saphique* was known to be autobiographical, *Gil Blas* feared legal repercussions if they were to print it, which speaks to the silencing of an accurate account of female sexuality. It was finally printed by *Libraire de la Plume* in 1901 (Mesch 45).

Idylle Saphique is an autobiographical *roman à clef* which tells the story of an accomplished courtesan named Annhine de Lys who falls in love with an American woman named Flossie who recently moved to Paris. The two women are not able to peacefully exist as a couple because of the homophobic societal setting the two live in. The relationship between Annhine and Flossie represents de Pougy's own scandalous affair with American playwright, Natalie Clifford Barney.

In Courtney Sullivan's *The Evolution of the French Courtesan Novel: From de Chabrillan to Colette,* she explores *Idylle Saphique* as a feminist counter-discourse to *Nana,* explaining that it offers a humanistic portrayal of the courtesan by commenting upon the essential impossibility of living as a queer woman during the nineteenth century. Rachel Mesch, in her book *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle* examines *Idydlle Saphique* as a counter-discourse to the confining and negative portrayal of female sexuality by authors like Zola, and suggests that female writers' works like de Pougy's forged a platform for the future French feminist movement, influencing the opinion of French feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir by highlighting the female experience as "other." Meanwhile, Jennifer Waelti-Walters notes in her book, *Damned Women: Lesbians in the French Novel,* the queer

visibility of de Pougy's work and explores de Pougy's depiction of the blind egoism of her male counterparts.

The novel has elements of both naturalism and decadence; since the novel does not fully conform to either genre, it can be read as a protest to both. Both naturalism and decadence depended on their depiction of women as demure, idealistic, and confined to their private spheres- qualities which contradict that of a rebellious female *fin-de-siècle* author, who was regularly condemned and often compared to a prostitute for abandoning her gender role. As a result, for a female writer to truly conform to either genre was implausible and possibly even impossible. (Rachilde is the one exception who found success as a female decadent author, who I will discuss in the next chapter.) Mesch notes that texts like de Pougy's, "...engage many naturalist and decadent themes, [yet] their novels artfully resist the overarching symbolics and narrative structure of these dominant literary movements" (Mesch 80). Mesch explains, "Rather than read Pougy's novel through the lens of late nineteenth century decadent fiction and its concomitant anxieties about the female body, we must read it as an incisive commentary on them" (Mesch 45). While Zola seeks to control and conquer the female body in his novels, de Pougy is commenting upon and protesting the patriarchal desire to control and conquer the female body through literature.

The emotional toll and physical danger of being a courtesan

Idylle Saphique contributes to important counter-discourse to canonical texts on prostitution by showing an authentic point of view from an actual sex worker, in contrast to the fantastical male-authored accounts like Zola's *Nana*, which at once sexualized and condemned its prostitute protagonists, while offering little to no insight on the trauma they may have endured. Sex workers of nineteenth century France endured physical danger, emotional trauma,

and violent stigma from the outside world. While Liane de Pougy's experience and that of her protagonist Annhine were of the most privileged group of sex workers possible, courtesans still were not immune to these job features. Sullivan explains, "At the turn of the twentieth century, writers such as de Pougy pushed the genre of the courtesan novel in an innovative direction as they included candid descriptions of the perils sex workers face. De Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* features several scenes where Annhine… faces dangers when soliciting clients and expresses psychological anguish from the abuses she has suffered as a prostitute" (Sullivan 41). Although Émile Zola's *Nana* shows its protagonist experiencing traumatic situations on the job, including ostracization from respectable society, violent clients, and the risk of being detained by police and locked up in jail, Zola depicts Nana as being fairly emotionless and mostly unfazed by these experiences. De Pougy exhibits these same features from an entirely different perspective in that we witness the inner turmoil and experience Annhine's anxiety while in danger.

In the middle of the novel, Annhine receives a request from a mysterious suitor via a messenger who offers Annhine 25,000 francs in total, an astronomical amount even for the expansive payments Annhine was used to. Although she normally wouldn't see someone she didn't know, the money is lucrative enough that Annhine acquiesces. Upon arriving, Annhine immediately senses that something is wrong and expresses that her heart is pounding and she wants to leave. The mysterious man directes Annhine to undress. As soon as she is naked, the man pulls Flossie, Annhine's girlfriend, out from around the door. Annhine discovers that the client was really Flossie's jealous fiance, Will[11], whose real intention was shaming Annhine in front of Flossie so that Flossie would be disgusted by her and stop seeing her.

This passage is worth analyzing because it depicts a potentially dangerous sex work exchange from the point of view of the sex worker as opposed to an observer, as was typically

[11]De Pougy intended for Will to represent poet Jean Lorraine.

show in *fin-de-siècle* literature. Sullivan notes, "...male authors of the period never depicted john scenes from the frightened prostitute's point of view, yet Annhine's aforementioned experience offers a perspective the reader does not get in *Nana*" (Sullivan 43). Most literature on sex work is created by non-sex workers and its authors speak for them; de Pougy is protesting this practice by creating a work that offers an authentic and genuine portrayal written by someone who has actually experienced what she is writing about.

In *Idylle Saphique,* we as readers are not viewing the prostitute as an object or subhuman who is inevitably getting what she deserves because of her evil whorish ways. Nor are we onlookers viewing a victim-figure who we pity because of her dumb and naive behavior; Annhine's sex work transactions usually go smoothly and successfully, and she exhibits logic and discretion, as exemplified by the usually fastidious screening process she goes through. Instead, we as readers are experiencing sex work through the eyes and voice of the sex worker.

De Pougy is also commenting in this passage that sex work is not inherently harmful but has the potential to be. Many accounts of *fin-de-siècle* sex work are very binary, ranging from either the condemning literature of Zola and the damning studies of Parent-Châtelet, or the idealistic literature of Balzac and Alexandre Dumas fils in *La Dame aux Camélias*. In contemporary discussions of sex work as well, which I will discuss in the final chapter, sex workers are often pressured to answer whether sex work is degrading or empowering. De Pougy makes the comment that it is neither inherently degrading or inherently empowering. It is a job that comes with negatives and positives like any other.

Finally, what is most enlightening about this passage is de Pougy's depiction of how stigma that surrounds sex work can be the most harmful and dangerous factor that affects sex workers. Arguably the most traumatizing aspect of sex work is not from the traditional clients

themselves but from the outside world's stigma. When public sentiment sends the message that sex workers don't matter as people, men who would be prone to violence then have ammunition to justify their actions. Stigma, including the need to "out" a sex worker for their shameful identity as "other[12]," results in violence. Will's true intention in soliciting Annhine's services is just a performative taunt to prove to Flossie that Annhine is a worthless whore. Thus, Will is not really a true client; he is pretending to be one in his efforts to expose Annhine.

Meanwhile, de Pougy offers brilliant commentary on men of the *fin-de-siècle* era. When Altesse receives a letter from Raoule de la Douanne, "the lover of whom she was so fond," he says that he must end their relationship because his family is forcing him to get married to a more respectable woman. De la Douanne explains to Altesse that it is necessary in order to retain his honor. Altesse thinks, "Honor… the last word made her lips twitch ironically. Honor, they knew all about that, these people…One is, after all, a gentleman; one knows that love has to be paid for. Then, as if that wasn't enough, he asked her- he asked her- to help him have courage" (de Pougy 178). Threatened by his family to be cut off financially, he "took the first name on the list of marriageable young ladies put before him, the way one chooses a dish from a menu…" (de Pougy 178). Altesse is disgusted with the hypocrisy that is so blatant in these gender dynamics. Men can freely move about the world having sex with whomever they please, accessing the services of sex workers in such a way that a woman could never get away with. Later, they can engage in marriage contracts with a person with whom they are not in love; thus marriage in this sense is merely institutionalized prostitution, which Rachilde comments upon heavily in her novel *Monsiuer Vénus* , which I will discuss in the next chapter. In Raoul de la Douanne's case in fact, the sex worker has more agency and mobility than the wife, since she can choose her clients

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[12] See: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* for the theaoretical framework for how "otherness" is caused by and contributes to oppression.

and has multiple different options who she can see variously. Waelti-Walters notes that de Pougy "...depicts even the most well-disposed and sympathetic men as unaware of women's needs, both emotional and economic, because they are enclosed in their male egoism" (Waelti-Walters 79). De Pougy is thus suggesting that due to the societal structures in place which allow for such entitlement of men, it is not even possible for them to conceive of women's needs.

Job requirements: Intelligent, emotionally aware, and tenacious

Liane de Pougy depicts a fuller and more dynamic view of sex work in contrast to the binary depictions which fill *fin-de-siècle* literature (and contemporary literature as well). In contrast to *Nana*, which shows a contradictory portrait of a two-dimensional courtesan protagonist, *Idylle Saphique* depicts the courtesan protagonist as intelligent, cultured, and introspective. By showing a broader range of the experience of the courtesan, de Pougy shows the reader a more multifaceted depiction of sex work itself.

In Zola's novel, the protagonist courtesan Nana is depicted with any negative trait that could be prescribed to a woman, thus indicating Zola's lack of authenticity, and desire to quell the male fear of female sexual power by conquering the female body. Despite Nana's ability to amass dizzying wealth, she was depicted as dumb, unaware, and naive. Despite her tumultuous past and ability to surmount those obstacles, she was depicted as emotionless and idealistic. This contradictory dichotomy in the portrayal of any women who exhibits sexual autonomy is a classic feature of traditional *fin-de-siècle* literature that served the patriarchal agenda.

In *Idylle Saphique*, Liane de Pougy comments upon specific qualities that were necessary to be a successful courtesan, indicating that it was not something that any random person could stumble upon as the result of having an attractive body, as Émile Zola suggests. It required intelligence and dedicated sales skills. It also required the ability to be perceptive to clients'

thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and a tenacious willingness to face continuous danger and harassment. By noting Annhine's useful qualities, depicting her diagnosis of hysteria, her love of plays like *Hamlet*, and expressing the desire to broaden her emotional and mental horizons through books, de Pougy offers a more realistic depiction of the sex worker. Courtney Sullivan notes, "When read in conjunction with the canonical texts on prostitution," texts like *Idylle Saphique* "…underscore the gumption it takes for these women to market themselves and perform in front of hostile audiences. While texts like Nana often portray the ascent of the demi-mondaine as precipitous, the courtesan novels indicate that achieving fame, wealth, and notoriety often took years of hustling under difficult financial and social conditions" (Sullivan 44). Texts like *Idyle Saphique* reclaim the existence of the *fin-de-siècle* sex worker by depicting her as more than just a body.

Annhine's best friend, Tesse, is based on the real-life courtesan Valtesse de la Bigne, who was one of the courtesans Émile Zola based the character Nana on (Andersen 3) and serves to complete de Pougy's more dynamic depiction of sex work by expressing the upsides to her life as a courtesan in contrast to Annhine's struggles. She exhibits many qualities that Nana has; she expresses the importance of money and gratitude for her luxurious life as a courtesan. My interpretation of Altesse's character is a reclamation of dignity from Nana's character. Altesse says, "'You see, Annhine, life has given me everything: health, fortune, intelligence, beauty, and above all the gift of knowing how to make use of them. I have the soul and the pride of a courtesan in the best sense of the word: I am not petty, I do not hide behind a mark of hypocrisy, I do not cower in fear'" (De Pougy 180). In contrast to Zola's interpretation of de la Bigne as diseased, naive, and emotionally, unaware, de Pougy's interpretation of de la Bigne is more favorable and realistic.

Mesch opines that Tesse's character serves to reflect patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* views, when she notes, "This glorification of the life of the courtesan reads like the voice of *fin-de-siecle* fiction; this is the description we might expect Nana to offer of her lifestyle" (Mesch 48). My opinion of Tesse's character is that she serves to offer a depiction of the many luxurious upsides to courtesan life while de Pougy's autobiographical main character stays safely out of the firing line. That is, Annhine (de Pougy) can make the comment that there are many logical upsides to her lifestyle, without being shamed more than she already is by admitting she enjoys having sex with men for money. Women during de Pougy's era couldn't safely express such bold opinions in a way that was direct; it could only be done passively or metaphorically.

It is worth observing that Liane de Pougy amassed such an enormous fortune that she certainly could have retired from her career as a courtesan much sooner than she had if she absolutely hated her job. One would guess that despite the negative aspects of her job which were certainly valid, the mansions, servants, vacations, fine art, jewelry, and societal clout certainly didn't hurt. What's more, Valtesse de la Bigne, whom the character Tesse was based on, was a friend and mentor to Liane de Pougy. So it is unlikely that de Pougy would have intentionally depicted her friend and mentor in such a negative light to express a critique. Liane de Pougy intended to depict a fuller and more dynamic view of sex work in contrast to the binary depictions which fill *fin-de-siècle* literature (and contemporary literature as well). In the relationship between Tesse and Annhine, de Pougy is able to offer a more humanistic portrayal of the life of the courtesan by showing both the positives and the negatives.

In the novel, Annhine is described as having, "a little soul that did not go with her body. She thought, and analyzed, she had a vivid imagination, a decent mind, a very remarkable ability to observe" (de Pougy 21). In this passage, it appears that de Pougy is intentionally depicting

Annhine in contrast to Nana, as someone who exhibits the ability to analyze and observe, two qualities that are important for sex workers to possess. Yet, in the next line she adds, “useless gifts for a woman prized for her beauty” (de Pougy 21). Was de Pougy claiming that these characteristics were useless for her job because she was pressured by society to not fully complement herself and thus the courtesan protagonist in her novel? In this passage, Annhine is again serving as the more socially acceptable of de Pougy’s two courtesan portrayals. While Altesse is bold, confident, and entirely unashamed of her identity as a courtesan, Annhine is slightly more apologetic and conformist, thus making her more palatable for the *fin-de-siècle* reader.

Towards the end of the novel, one of Flossie’s former girlfriends, Jane, sees Annhine and Flossie together at a ball. She is so distraught by seeing them together that she kills herself in front of the pair. This causes Annhine to have a mental breakdown and awakens back at home in her bed, with a doctor tending to her. While de Pougy is commenting upon queer visibility in this passage, she also uses it to make a comment upon the affliction of hysteria that so many *fin-de-siècle* women were diagnosed with.

Upon awakening, Annhine is being seen by a doctor who diagnoses her with hysteria; the ailment that doctors of the 18th and nineteenth century most commonly diagnosed women with to attribute any variety of physical or mental ailments. Scientific theory of the time believed that hysteria was a result of being over or under sexually driven, or the result of women exercising their mind to too large an extent. Mesch notes, “The hysteria diagnosis is significant as an unspoken undercurrent here because it underlines the doctor’s necessary blindness to Nhine’s internal conflict (Mesch 49). The female existence was not validated or taken seriously during the *fin-de-siècle era*, especially by the medical community. The doctor’s suggested remedy was,

"Rest, calm, hygiene, a little distraction. As little reading and letter-writing as possible. Walk, rest the mind and exercise the body" (de Pougy 152). This remedy speaks to the male authority figure's intention of silencing the female mind and the female voice while using her for her body by prohibiting intellectual activity and encouraging the physical. Her internal conflict of whether to be with Flossie or subject to societal roles is ignored since she is only valued for her body.

The doctor in *Idylle Saphique* strongly echoes the nineteenth century medical sentiment towards the treatment of women: any woman's body is the root of all of her problems, and her mind must be silenced. "Nhine is not interested in renouncing her profession, or sexual desire generally; instead, she would like to maintain the integrity of her *ame* [soul] while still enjoying the pleasures of her body" (Mesch 49). In this passage, de Pougy is also protesting the binary options that were offered to women. Men of the *fin-de-siècle* era could be blatant whores and concurrently spiritual leaders and social heroes; women with the same behavior are depicted as spiritually and emotionally sick. Is it so much to ask, suggests de Pougy, to be allowed to be a sexual being and also a whole woman?

Queer visibility

De Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* comments upon the essential impossibility of living as a queer woman during the nineteenth century. While *Nana* vilifies homosexuality by connecting it with nefarious, lustful behavior, and causing death and destruction, *Idylle Saphique* depicts the death and destruction of the lives of her queer characters as being caused by the homophobic society the novel was set in.

Annhine, the queer protagonist, tries to conform to society as a queer woman the best she can. Yet, even with the enormous privilege that she has as a result of her success as a highly paid prostitute, she meets her demise as a result of society having no place for her as a woman who

defies the heteronormative hierarchy. In Jennifer Waelti-Walters' book, *Damned Women: Lesbians in French Novels,* Waelti-Walters explans, "There is no satisfactory solution for women here, especially not for lesbians. Women in France in 1900 cannot survive without male financial support. The entire economic system is male-dominated. Women, and lesbians are no exception, must perforce support the system or struggle against it from within" (Waelti-Walters, 77). Interestingly, Waelti-Walters suggests that de Pougy was not intentionally depicting queer oppression in *L'Idylle Sapphique*, despite the fact that de Pougy was a queer woman and the novel was very accurately autobiographical. She opines, "Whether Liane de Pougey was aware of the profundity of what she had written or not (and I would say no), by its polarization of male and female, heterosexual and lesbian roles, her book offers material for a very clear analysis of the reality of lesbian life in 1900" (Waelti-Walters 77). Waelti-Walters does not offer why she believes de Pougy was unaware of the profundity of what she had written. Could she be participating in tired stereotypes condemning women who make use of the power of their sexuality, and as a result, isn't taking her seriously?

What Waelti-Walters does explain is that, "Any discussion of lesbianism in the novel refers to it as perversion- even Flossie… It appears that Pougy enjoyed her escapade with Natalie Barney to the full, but in retrospect she either thinks that she should not have or, being prudent, fears that her friends and admirers will not approve of the episode" (Waelti-Walters 76). I would say that the reason for de Pougy's lack of full embrace of queerness in her novel would be the latter, but to an even greater extent than Waelti-Walters suggests. De Pougy expresses the impossibility of queer women existing in autonomy during 1901, even for someone of extreme privilege. Can we blame her for formulating a more apologetically ashamed depiction of lesbian

love than the pride we are able to embrace today? I argue that it was out of the need for survival that *Idylle Saphique* was less proud than we would have liked.

Mesch confirms her opinion on the intentionally divisive queer commentary of Liane de Pougy when she notes, "*Idylle Saphique* is also a commentary on the limits to writing about lesbian sexuality in *fin-de-siècle* culture. Pougy acknowledged these limits in her journals *Mah Cahiers Bleus,* which she kept between 1919 and 1941. In them she admits that for the book to be published, she could not portray the lesbian relationship in a positive light" (Mesch 59).

Annhine defies tired stereotypes again when she comments upon a book about her life like Nana had, yet with an entirely different comment:

> She told herself that in this sunny setting, full of life and varied scenery, they would live out, naked, a delicious novel of love and strange pleasures, pleasures unknown and longed for!... She *wanted* to know, she was burning to know, with a desire to finish this book whose pages she had leafed through without going further than the tantalizing first chapter, which had so violently attracted her to something beyond the usual banality. (de Pougy 157)

This passage from *Idylle Saphique* appears to be a direct response to Zola's claim that courtesans are too idealistic and shallow to desire something as powerfully real and true as he believes his writing to be, as exhibited by the scene I discussed in chapter two: Nana discusses a book written about a courtesan and laments, "she also expressed indignation and revulsion at the sort of filth that claimed to give a true picture of life. As if you could put everything into a book, as if a novel should be written for any reason but a reader's entertainment! Nana held very firm views on books and drama; novels should be full of sentiment and high principles, uplifting, something to make you dream!" (Zola 298). De Pougy was openly critical of Zola's work and

his depiction of courtesans, as discussed in the introduction to the English translation of *Idylle Saphique*. She explicitly has her courtesan protagonist express the desire to learn more and to understand things beyond just the surface-level. This speaks to de Pougy's intention to defy stereotypes that fill *fin-de-siècle* literature.

What de Pougy is showing the reader in this scene is that Annhine seeks authentic self-understanding. Mesch notes, "Nhine's transcription of her sexual desire for Flossie into a desire for knowledge figured through the book brings together lesbian desire and the desire to write and thus signals an important moment in the staging of Pougy's own path to authorship. The *delicieux roman d'amour* represents Nhine's quest for self-understanding through the exploration of an unknown sexuality" (Mesch 54). De Pougy's use of the metaphor of a book is a rewriting of the story of the courtesan. It is a revisioning of the silencing of the female voice, and a reclamation of power for the sexually liberated female.

Autobiographical ending

The ending of *Idylle Saphique* is abrupt and unrealistic: Annhine proclaims that she will leave Flossie and Will alone, thus submitting to society's already carved-out place for her. Flossie comes to rescue Annhine from her home, but by the time she arrives, Annhine has died, presumably from exhaustion. Perhaps this was intended to be a stylistic feature of the decadent genre to which *Idylle Saphique* leans towards (female death that was in some way caused by infatuation or love). Or perhaps de Pougy intended to make a comment with her unrealistic ending.

The ending appears to be symbolic of a death of psyche, since queer women (or any women who go against the grain) could not survive in the patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* era. Sullivan believes the ending was the only way de Pougy could tone down how scandalous the novel was

in order to have decent reception. Sullivan notes, "In such a reading, de Pougy had to end the novel with the death of her progressive protagonist in order to make it past the censors" (Sullivan 52). In effect, de Pougy made her novel more palatable to the authoritative censors, yet was also able to make the point that death was really Annhine's only option. It's possible the ending was intentionally abrupt and unrealistic so that de Pougy could comment upon its lack of plausibility.

Interestingly, de Pougy's own end of life was somewhat one of subtle submission to the patriarchy as well. In 1910, at the age of 40, de Pougy married Romanian Prince Georges Ghika, who was in his 20s, making her Princess Ghika. After her son from her first marriage was killed in an air crash in the earlier part of the Great War, Liane de Pougy returned to Catholicism and ended up continuing the convent education which she had left off at age 16.

In her forties, de Pougy ended up coming across a Catholic orphanage called Asylum of Saint Agnes, which housed children with birth defects. She dedicated the remainder of her life supporting the asylum, making many in-person visits, as well as using her well-honed skills of soliciting money to convince her many friends of extreme wealth to make massive donations. When she died, she was buried in the grounds of the Saint Agnus Asylum as Sister Anne-Marie.

While many feminist readers may be disappointed that Liane de Pougy returned to Catholicism, the religion that is arguably the most powerful driving force in the oppression of women and queer people, what I make of this is that de Pougy may have chosen survival over protest; while we can go against the grain to a certain extent, submitting to the powers that be makes for a smoother and easier ride. Or perhaps she wanted to find meaning in her life through spirituality and the only route that was accessible to her during her time was Catholicism. Similar to her protagonist Annhine, de Pougy made waves in the confining society to which she existed, said what she had to say, and then exited entirely.

Chapter Three: *Monsieur Vénus*, or, Sir Venus: Conquering The Male Body

1) Introduction / Literature review
2) Subversion of hysteria diagnosis in protagonist and author
3) References to books
4) The female gaze
5) Queer visibility
6) The conquered feminine body
7) Subversion of patriarchy through sex work

Introduction

Rachilde's 1884 decadent novel *Monsieur Vénus* critiques the gender binary as well as masculine-dominated relationships by depicting a macabre love story that dismantles traditional gender roles. It is a feminist protest to the prevailing *fin-de-siècle* discourse by using the patriarchal confinement of the identity of women to its advantage. By appealing to the male ego in order to subvert patriarchal structures, Rachilde revisions the depiction of the courtesan by transcending traditional depictions of evil in a genre typically dominated by male authors.

The title, *Monsieur Vénus* , translates to Sir Venus. Venus is the goddess of love. In analyzing the masculinized female protagonist, Raoule, and the feminized male character, Jacques, we can deduce that *Monsieur Vénus* could refer to either one of them, thus reinforcing Rachilde's statement that gender roles are socially constructed.

The novel offers visibility to the trans and gender-nonconforming existence, centuries ahead of its time. Rachilde was born Marguerite Vallette-Eymery. Despite being referred to as a woman in scholarly review and historical accounts, it could be argued that Rachilde was trans or gender non-conforming; She chose her gender-neutral pseudonym in her late teens, had a masculine style of dressing, and her business cards read, *homme de lettres*, or "man of letters." [13]

[13] In consistency with scholarly review on Rachilde, I use she/her pronouns

Although I make the argument that Rachilde's writing offered a feminist revisioning of the decadent novel, Rachilde herself did not identify as a feminist and in fact, critiqued French feminists of her time. Yet, she was feminist in that she managed to achieve female empowerment through male manipulation, in both her own actions and through her female characters. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed discusses the concept of being a "feminist killjoy" in her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, where she defines it as the willingness to openly proclaim one's identity as a feminist and directly protest misogyny and patriarchal structures. Rachilde, who mostly hung around male-dominated literary circles, was not willing to be this proud feminist figure that Ahmed identifies; instead, her approach was more insidious.

Monsieur Vénus is about an extremely wealthy, upper-class woman named Raoule in late nineteenth century France who has been diagnosed with hysteria. She seduces a feminine, lower-class man named Jacques, who makes paper flowers for a living, and shares a small, dingy flat with his sister, who is a prostitute of humble means. Jacques becomes Raoule's courtesan; she pays for his rent and living expenses, in return for having serious control over his actions, including whom he can speak to, what he can or can't do, what they do in bed, and which substances he consumes. When Raoule feels Jacques hasn't followed through on her requirements, she harms him violently. Raoule and Jacques take on *fin-de-siècle* gender roles that are reversed, literally and essentially. Raoule takes on the role of a controlling and abusive husband while Jacques becomes her submissive and enslaved wife. In the end, through Jacques' death and Raoule's treatment of his dead body, we see that Jacques is merely a vessel for Raoule's desire for domination and sexual pleasure.

Scholars who analyze *Monsieur Vénus* consistently find it to be a critique of gender roles. Rachel Mesch discusses Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Vénus* in her book, *The Hysteric's Revenge:*

French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle. She argues that Rachilde offered a rewriting of the decadent genre by flipping gender roles on their head and offering a satirical alternative to a genre typically dominated by male authors. In Steven Wilson's "The Quest for Fictionality: Prostitution and Metatextuality in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus,*" he analyzes the novel as a decadent work that responds to the critique of naturalism's inability to portray the genuine pain and suffering comprising modern life by portraying suffering that is less mechanical and scientific. Wilson focuses on the portrayal of prostitution in *Monsieur Vénus*, comparing it to works such as Zola's *Nana*, as a work that "disrupts hegemonic norms of propriety" (Wilson 3). Likewise, Melanie C. Hawthorne, in her article, "'*Monsieur Vénus*: A Critique of Gender Roles," argues that Rachilde's novel transcends gender norms within Decadence, a genre defined by plotlines with devious sexual behavior. Hawthorne argues that *Monsieur Vénus* breaks down gender roles to portray what would happen if women were to take on traditional male sex and relationship roles, representing a "not entirely successful attempt at subversion by challenging phallocentric discourse" (Hawthorne 170).

The novel satirizes male courting practices and depicts the behavior as emotionless and evil. Rachilde uses macabre aspects and shock value to present to the reader the traditionally male use of the female body by reversing gender roles and depicting a female main character who is as ruthless and cunning as the male heroes of male-authored *fin-de-siècle* literature.

Subversion of hysteria diagnosis in protagonist and author

Rachilde uses hysteria's popularity and complete lack of cohesive symptoms or causes to her advantage, in both herself and her protagonist. When *Monsieur Vénus* was written, hysteria was booming as an affliction that could be attributed to anything at all. While the lack of clearly

defined symptoms was a critique by many, Rachilde used hysteria to transcend gender restrictions by appealing to the male egotistical desire to be in authority.

In the beginning of the novel, a doctor comes to visit an adolescent Raoule. He notes, "'...A few years more, and that pretty creature whom you cherish too much will, in my opinion, without ever loving them, have known as many men as there are our fathers and aves on her aunt's rosary. No happy medium! A nun or a monster! God's bosom or that of passion! It would, perhaps, be better to lock her up in a convent, since we put hysterical women in the Salpetriere! She doesn't know vice, yet she invents it!'" (Rachilde 26). Immediately the reader is set up with the idea that Raoule will be deviant- as we know, she did not become a nun. The doctor, the figure of authority, has the power to predict and dictate Rachilde's life. This passage highlights the binary definitions of women that defined patriarchal *fin-de-siècle* works. Women are either nuns or monsters. They must neatly fit into one of two boxes.

In her perceived weakened state as a hysteric, Raoule is held less accountable for her behavior and so can evade gender roles with more impunity. Mesch notes, "She exploits hysteria's lack of determinacy to reinvent the disease as an illness so subversive that it challenges the very patriarchal system in place to diagnose and contain such deviance" (Mesch 128). Similar to the contemporary diagnosis of ADHD or borderline personality disorder, the symptoms are so varied and vague that it can be used to excuse anything at all[14]. "These terms thus become empty labels that allow Raoule the freedom to act as she wishes- and her behavior, in its deviation from conventional femininity, is inevitably described as hysterical" (Mesch 129). In exchange for a reputation or title of wellness, Raoule can transcend traditional gender roles by

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[14] See: "Power, Selfhood, and Identity: A Feminist Critique of Borderline Personality Disorder" by Bria Berger which notes that 75% of BDP diagnoses are women. Also, "Women at the Margins: A Critique of the Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder" by Clare Shaw and Gillian Proctor, which notes that the diagnosis of BPD "pathologizes women for responses to oppression," especially in the context of "sexual violence and gender power relations in society."

abandoning all pretense of tradition and normalcy; she can act in a variety of different ways that would normally be met with harsher circumstances. Yet with her diagnosis, she can be cruel, illogical, a slut, masculine, and emotional, and have all of it explained by being beyond her control as a hysterical woman.

Rachilde appeals to male authority by giving her protagonist easy to identify symptoms of hysteria. Hysteria was very well known during the *fin-de-siècle* era and so many men would be familiar with the symptoms. Raoule's character exhibits the most stereotypical symptoms of hysteria- hypersexuality, lack of emotional stability, and a propensity for dramatic anger- without having the diagnosis of hysteria spelled out directly. This appeals to the male ego by making him feel like an intelligent, observant, well-read figure of masculine authority. (Unbeknownst to them, they have just been lured into Rachilde's trap of devouring an entire novel that critiques their very existence.) Mesch notes, "Raoule's diagnosis of hysteria thus gives all those familiar with it the comfort of medical and discursive authority, while it justifies her deviant behavior in whatever form it takes" (Mesch 132). With her hysteria diagnosis, Raoule has all agency to act whorish, violent, and self-indulgent- without inflicting the anxiety-driven protest of the male authority figure; his privileged and authoritative position is validated when he recognizes that Raoule is "an other." She is in the box the patriarchy has created for her, and thus is not a threat to the established power hierarchy.

What's more, Raoule is not unaware of the power she holds and how to use it to her advantage. She exploits her status as a woman when Raittolbe, a baron who is a suitor of Raoule as well as her usual confidante, questions her mysterious and puzzling behavior when she is secretly sneaking around with Jacques. Raoule responds, "'Nothing ought to astonish you, since I'm a woman…. I do the complete opposite of what I've promised. What could be more

natural!'" (Rachilde 65). Raoule is using misogynistic stereotypes to her advantage; as readers, we know that Raoule is being manipulative. We see from Raoule's eyes a critique of not just hysteria but of the male ego. By merely reaffirming her lowered status as female and thus illogical and unpredictable, Raoule is able to trick Raittolbe into believing her lies. This tactic is a honed skill of sex workers: validate Man's existence as important, intelligent and special; trick him into thinking he is infinitely in charge, and get away with whatever it is you want. (Usually money- in Raoule's case, it is to be able to transcend the gender binary by accessing the advantages of both feminine and masculine gender roles.)

Finally, Rachilde's critique of society is directly spelled out for the reader at the beginning of chapter nine, when it says, "The honest wife, when she gives herself to her legal husband, is in the same position as the prostitute when she gives herself to her lover… Nature has made these victims naked and society gives them only clothes. Without clothes there is no difference between them, only the difference in physical beauty; there, sometimes, it is the prostitute who wins" (Rachilde 107). The entire novel is a critique of male courting practices as a whole, and by extension, marriage as an institution. Considering the extent of control that a man has over his wife during this era, what is marriage after all, other than institutional prostitution? Rachilde is also making the comment that these roles are not inherent; "society gives them only clothes"- the gender roles that oppress both wives and sex workers are constructions of society. This is clear in analyzing Raoule's ability to control and abuse Jacques in the same way that husbands control and abuse their wives.

Not only does Rachilde exploit the elasticity of the hysteria diagnosis in her protagonist, but she subverts the patriarchy by convincing the public that she was hysteric as well. Shortly after the initial Belgian publication of the novel, Rachilde began dating writer Maurice Barres.

He wrote a preface to the 1889 French edition of *Monsiuer Vénus* where he sympathizes with its readers' assumed anxiety about a young women crafting such a sexually voracious and violent novel. He explains to the readers that Rachilde herself has been diagnosed with hysteria, describing her as "a neurotic… a feverish girl… the spectacle of a rare perversity." Barres appeals to the egotistical male need to feel in charge by suggesting the novel is "the weepy fantasy of an isolated girl, a cerebral eccentricity, but of interest to the psychologist, the moralist, and the artist" (Barres 3). Melanie Hawthorne believes this to be an unfair sexist trope; yet if we look further, we can see that Rachilde was directing Barres' actions for her own subversive benefit.

Rachilde intentionally had Barres describe her as unwell in order to accomplish two important tasks: First, she comes off as less threatening to the patriarchal-dominated literary scene. She isn't the hated female intellectual; she is the stereotypical emotionally unwell woman. Second, she herself becomes a subject for the pseudo-male scientist/author/doctor to explore, thus ramping up the sensational shock value of the novel, satisfying the patriarchal desire to study and exploit the suffering female, thus boosting the novel's popularity. In effect, Rachilde uses the elasticity and ambiguity of the hysteria diagnosis to exploit medical science to her advantage for not just her protagonist, but herself as an author as well. Mesch explains, "Barres preface mimics the strategies of the decadent and naturalist writer who must disempower the sexual deviant he has created by the time he reaches his final paragraphs. In the process, Rachilde is transformed into a product of the decadent imagination rather than a creative force in and of herself, and the traditional *fin-de-siècle* paradigm of male writer/doctor/scientist to female subject is reinstated… " (Mesch 139). Rachilde manages to be successful in the male-dominated genre of Decadence by acting out stereotypical gender norms. From there, she critiques the

patriarchy entirely through plot structure, reversal of gender norms, and conquering the male body.

References to books

Throughout the novel are various references to Raoule as an author and Jacques as a work of literature. This literary device serves to reinforce the reversed gender roles in direct counter discourse to works like *Nana:* Raoule the woman becomes the masculine writer/scientist/doctor figure of authority, while Jacques is her powerless subject of analysis, molded at Roule's whim. Similar to Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique*, we see many elements of Raoule's identity in her female protagonist, thus offering further evidence of how counter-discourses to *fin-de-siècle* works expressed the desire to write one's own story in response to men speaking over them.

After Raittolbe leaves Marie's house after spending the night with her, he reflects upon the reason why he beat Jacques up, the implications of which become a painful obsessive thought. He concludes in sending Raoule a letter blaming the assault on Marie's dangerous fantasies of harming her brother. In the next paragraph, Jacques reflects upon his social positioning and acknowledges that he would never bother complaining. He thinks, "Jacques, whose body was a poem, knew that his poem would always be read more attentively than any letter from such a vulgar writer as he" (Rachilde 124). Jacques, although male, understands that through his feminized positioning his words hold no value. It is merely his body which holds attention. In fact, it is not despite, but because of the poetic beauty of his body that his mind and his voice are taken less seriously. The beautiful and thus feminized form loses value in the gendered, patriarchal hierarchy to which Jacques belongs.

Rachilde plays on the patriarchal structure of the *fin-de-siècle* era again by comparing Raoule's lovers to subjects she studies; in effect, objectifying her former lovers in the same way that Zola and his counterparts objectify their female subjects. "Its true Monsieur… that I've had lovers. Lovers in my life, like books in my library, to learn, to study...But I've never had passion, I haven't written my own book yet!" (Rachilde 69). It is clear that Raoule does not respect her lovers; they are collectors' items to her, or objective information to analyze and quantify. In her relationship with Jacques, she has finally reached actualization in that she is the fully dominant partner, thus allowing her the ability to "write her own book."

All three of the authors analyzed in this thesis choose to have their protagonists reference books depicting their own lives. In *Nana,* Nana expresses dislike for a novel that offers a depiction of courtesan life. Conversely, Liane de Pougy and Rachilde seem to be directly responding to Zola's unrealistic comment: In *Idylle Saphique,* Annhine expresses the desire to finish the novel she has begun in regards to her lesbian relationship with Flossie, as discussed in the prior chapter. Finally, in *Monsieur Vénus*, Raoule expresses the desire to author her own story from the perspective of the conqueror. Each of the two books' "novel within a novel" references reflect a feminist counter-discourse that defines the subgenre of the courtesan novel; they represent the voice of the sexually liberated woman who was so often silenced or misrepresented like that of Nana. De Pougy and Rachilde's protagonists' comment upon this amplifies the voice of the silenced female figure.

The female gaze

The term "male gaze" is defined by feminist scholar Laura Mulvey as the way popular media portray female characters as passive sexual objects while the viewer is intended to be the male pursuer[15]. This style, which has been the structure of entertainment sources for centuries

[15] See: Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

and continues to pervade literature and film even today, is reversed in *Monsieur Vénus* when Raoule objectifies Jacques' body when he is bathing.

Raoule demands that Jacques bathe while she stands directly outside of the bathtub, only the curtain blocking them while the two make conversation. Jacques wonders, "if she was peeking at him, for that would embarrass him, naturally…" (Rachilde 38). In fact, Raoule was peeking shamelessly. The fact that Raoule requests that he bathe is significant; it indicates that he is dirty. In this moment that is usually private, Jacques is not entitled to privacy.

While bathing, Jacques gets extremely vulnerable and confides in Raoule, sharing that "his poor father had died caught in some machinery gears, in Lille, his native town, one day when he drank too many; how his mother threw them out to run off with another man. They set out, brother and sister, for Paris… His tramp of a sister knew a thing or two already!" (Rachilde, 38). Jacques' childhood story sounds just like that of Nana's- or many of the other hundreds of thousands of women whose fall from grace began with being abandoned or orphaned by their parents, and end up in Paris, surviving by selling sexual experiences. The text reads,

> Transfixed, behind the curtain, Mlle de Vénérande could see him without effort. The gentle glow of the candle fell softly on his fair skin, all velvety like a peach. He had his back turned, and he was acting the lead part in a scene by Voltaire, as told in detail by a courtesan called Ruby Lips. Worthy of the Vénus Callipyge, this curve of his back where his spine ended in a voluptuous plane and rose firm and plump in two adorable contours, looked like a Parian marble sphere with the transparency of amber (Rachilde 39).

The reader feels sad for Jacques during this intimate moment, just when Raoule is sexualizing and objectifying him. It is significant that the vulnerable and painful childhood story

is coupled with Roule's "female gaze" and invasive sexual harassment- Rachilde is depicting a reversal of men taking advantage of women at their most vulnerable moments. The bath scene in *Monsieur Vénus* is a classic example of Rachilde flipping traditional gender roles on their head in order to critique the male domination of women.

Love expressed through violence

The normalization of violence in relationships is a recurring theme in *Monsieur Venus.* Rachilde depicts deep imbalances of power based on privilege and explores how these dynamics manifest themselves. By examining the ways that sex workers are discriminated against because of their identity, Rachilde makes a comment upon the how the heteronormative hierarchy empowers some and oppresses most.

The existence of the male sex worker as well as the trans or non-binary sex worker have their own distinct ways they experience oppression and stigma, which Rachilde depicts in her novel. Societal homophobia and transphobia contribute to violence which is most often taken out on the sex workers who identify this way. For example, Raoule's paranoid jealous delusions come true when Raitolbe comes to the studio to tell Jacques to not marry Raoule, and he finds Jacques asleep and naked. Raittolbe feels so strangely attracted to Jacques that he almost feels as if he is hallucinating; yet his repulsion at discovering these homosexual urges within himself incites deep fear and anger: "instead of the blue all around him he saw red, his mustache bristled, his teeth clenched, a shiver ran the length of his body, followed by a cold sweat. He was almost frightened" (Rachilde 115). Rachilde highlights the fear of sex appeal in general as well; namely, the fear that straight, cis-gender men such as Émile Zola and his literary counterparts experience when caught momentarily in the loss of control that is brought about when so enraptured by the

victim whose body they seek to conquer. This is the same fear that caused censorship of the female writer and the sexually liberated woman: a relinquishing of power by those in control.

Raittolbe wakes Jacques up, attempting to ignore his attraction to him. He asserts that Jacques must never marry Raoule because the two are of a completely different class and it would disrupt societal structure. Jacques responds by alluding to Raittolbe's newfound secret relationship with Jacques' sister, Marie, the lower-class prostitute: "Just as Marie Silvert has become your mistress whether you wanted her or not, baron, one never knows what one is capable of.'' This suggestion hits the baron very hard, and he thinks to himself,

> Could it be that this rent boy was telling the truth? Was beauty really no longer necessary to attain physical enjoyment? He, the elegant rake, had sunk into the mud out of devotion, and then, suddenly, the expert cynicism of the most shameless guttersnipe had stabbed him in his most secret fibers, and the ferment of corruption that a moralist always carries deep within had risen to the surface. (Rachilde 119)

This quote speaks to the absolute ego and pride that grips Raittolbe as he compares himself to an elegant rake, sinking to the depths of the lower class out of his devotion to Raoule (really, his unrequited romantic obsession for her.) He compares Jacques to a shameless guttersnipe, who, in forcing Raittolbe to acknowledge within himself the darkest recesses of his soul, has filled him with violent anger as a result.

Raittolbe grabs Jacques' arm and demands that Jacques will not marry Raoule. Jacques forbids Raittolbe to touch him, saying, "Raoule doesn't want you to." Raittolbe, "seized by a blind rage whose violence he could probably not understand," beats Jacques mercilessly with a wooden easel until it breaks into pieces (Rachilde 120). The "violence that he could probably not

understand" is Raittolbe's privilege as a cisgender, heterosexual man being threatened. In this very moment, Raittolbe was threatened by three separate categories of people to whom he socially has control over: the sexually liberated woman, the queer man, and the prostitute.

Raoule is the sexually liberated woman who prohibits anyone from touching Jacques; Marie is the impoverished prostitute who Raittolbe had considered himself above, yet appears to be on some level controlling him by his sexual attraction to her; Jacques, by his sexualized feminization through his relationship with Raoule, has become, in effect, a queer person as well as Raoule's courtesan. While he attracts Raittolbe sexually, he reiterates Raoule's prohibition of physical contact with him. All three come together to control Raittolbe's agency in both his behavior and his sex life. How does Raoittolbe react to these subgroups who are traditionally beneath him challenging his position of authority? True to privileged masculine form, he reacts violently.

Shortly after, Raittolbe is in Marie's bedroom, and refers to her, in his head, as "the prostitute" (Rachilde 121) signifying his low opinion of her: she is not a human being to him, despite his feelings for her, but a prostitute. He admits to beating up Jacques, and wonders aloud why he did it. "'You were excited… Love often has that effect,'" explains Marie. Is Marie referring to Raittolbe's love for her, or for Raoule? (Or perhaps Rachilde intends for the reader to interpret the "love" as being for Jacques?) Marie's explanation of love causing unexplainable blind rage is significant in that it speaks to how control and violence in relationships is normalized- what she really means when referring to love is obsessive romantic control. Toxic masculinity gives men the agency to violently harm their lovers or other parties and chalk it up to "excited love."

Although Rachilde paints Marie in a mostly negative and unlikeable light, similar to Liane de Pougy, she humanizes the sex worker figure by depicting her with emotional depth and suffering emotional pain. In the novel, Raittolbe breaks off his relationship with Marie and sends her a hundred francs. Later, she refers to their affair in the presence of Raoule and Jacques. Raittolbe, embarrassed in front of the two, snaps at Marie, "That's enough… you did your job, I paid you: we're even" (Rachilde 166). He again reduces Marie down to her outcast and ostracized position as a prostitute, this time in public, in order to neatly evade responsibility for his part in their romantic relationship: if prostitutes aren't real people, we can treat them as worthless objects with impunity. By denying that their relationship was something besides transactional, Raittolbe gets out of jail free.

Extremely hurt, Marie explains quite humbly and vulnerably, "'You see, sir… being a poor working girl doesn't mean a person doesn't have a heart. You say that I just did my job with you, but you know that's not true! I loved you, I still love you, and you've only to say the word if you like, I'd do anything for…" Raittolbe interrupts her profession of love to dismiss her. Marie, trapped in this cycle of hatred, gets revenge later when she tells Raoule's aunt the truth about everything, causing Raoule's aunt to write Raoule off. "You're the sister-in-law of a prostitute" (Rachilde 173).

Conquered feminine body

While *Nana* and other *fin-de-siècle* novels depict various imagery of the conquered feminine body, Raoule keeps her female protagonist alive; but continues the tradition of the conquered feminine, in a slightly different way. Her intention is not to conquer the feminine form, but to critique those that do. Dilts notes, "Raoule is not mocking Jacques's femininity to denigrate women or to deem them inferior subjects, but rather to reveal the relationship between

gender and sexuality as performative and socially determined" (Dilts 15). By dismantling gender roles, Rachilde shows that the empowerment men get from their masculinity, and conversely, the disempowerment that women get from their femininity, is not inherent, and merely a social construct.

Raoule admits to getting high off Jacques' shame- it is a power trip for her. "Then, willing to agree to anything if it would appease his shame, which was beginning to intoxicate her…" (Rachilde 58) Shortly after, Raoule intoxicates Jacques with hashish, not telling him what it is and insisting he take it (Rachilde 60). After Jacques has taken the spoonful of the mysterious green substance, she notes, "You'll see with my eyes, taste with my lips… You'll understand… everything you don't understand when I'm speaking to you now!" (Rachilde 61). In this scene, Raoule's wish for control echoes the *fin-de-siècle* practice of male authority figures speaking for women. Rachilde is furthering her metaphor of Jacques being her objectified subject; she is seeing for him, tasting for him, and making him understand what she seeks to impress upon him. Throughout the novel, Raoule's masculinization reflects a power-hungry, omniscient, egotistical God. "Raoule looked at him for a minute, wondering with a kind of superstitious terror if she, like God, had not created a being in her own image" (Rachilde 97). Rachilde comments on the God-like position men situate themselves in both relationships and, from a broader perspective, in society as a whole. It is their privileged position that they are able to control the experience of women, making them see with men's eyes, taste with men's lips, and force them to understand what it is men want them to know.

In a further extension of the parody of the jealous and prideful privileged man, Raoule hurts Jacques even further when she discovers that Raittolbe assaulted Jacques. She asserts, "'He wanted you and you resisted him!'" (Rachilde 129) Raoule bandages Jacques up, but is filled

with jealous rage, and overcome with "a supreme desire to possess him through caresses just as that torturer had possessed him through blows." She begins fiercely kissing and grabbing him. When Jacques complains that she is hurting him, her response is, "'So cry! What does it matter, he has seen you smile!'" (Rachilde 130). Jacques' feelings don't matter; his purity in Raoule's eyes is his true value to her, which has now been tainted. She progresses into biting, pinching, and scratching his open wounds so that they bleed once more. Raoule is the enraged husband who, after his wife has been raped, blames her and beats her out of anger. It is apparent to the reader that Raoule's anger is not out of empathy for Jacques, but anger that another man has desecrated this object which belongs to her. "Raoule finds that her new role begins to dictate her behavior and rather than changing the unique position she occupies, she becomes marked by it. She starts to have fits of jealousy and sadism" (Hawthorne 174). What Raoule actually cares about is possessing Jacques. While Zola critiques the prostitute, Rachilde critiques the male ego.

Jacques and Raittolbe end up having romantic relations. When Raoule finds out, in the ultimate use of manipulative female power, Raoule suggests both men duel until the death. Hawthorne notes, "Curiously, although Jacques is feminized elsewhere, Raoule assumes that he will take the traditional male role of dualist when honor is at stake" (Hawthorne 168). Raoule is yet again using subversive techniques to access male power and enact her own violence: she is pitting them against one another physically. True to selfish masculine form, Raoule uses what she can when it is convenient to her. In a reversal of the *fin-de-siècle* death scene, Raittolbe kills Jacques in their duel. Mesch notes, "The novel thereby ends with a reversal of narrative convention, with the death of the male hero as a result of his sexual deviance, as opposed to the conventional expulsion of subversive female sexuality in the interest of narrative closure" (Mesch 135). In protest to the conquering of the female body that fills patriarchal nineteenth

century works, Rachilde offers a revisioning of punishment as a result of devious sexual behavior. As well as critiquing the gender binary, she reclaims female existence through her death scene.

Finally, the extent of Raoule's exploitation of Jacques is illuminated to a new level when she turns his dead body into a wax model that she has sex with each night. Jacques has become literally objectified as, "a wax figure covered with transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the gold hair of the chest are natural; the teeth that ornament the mouth, the nails on the hands and feet were torn from a corpse. The enameled eyes have an adorable look" (Rachilde 208). While the male conqueror of novels like *Nana* destroys his protagonist with gory pus and blood, the female conqueror in *Monsieur Vénus* makes her protagonist into a doll. His enameled eyes, described as "adorable," further Rachilde's metaphor of feminine form as a beautiful doll, more useful to the masculine conqueror dead than alive.

The narration closes by noting that sometimes a man visits the altar, and sometimes a woman, noting, "They come to kneel beside the bed, and, after contemplating at length the marvelous lines of the wax statue, they embrace it, kiss it on the lips. A spring hidden inside the flanks connects with the mouth and animates it at the same time that it spreads apart the thighs" (Rachilde 210). As the reader we know that each person is actually Raoule, sometimes dressed feminine and sometimes dressed masculine. The use of the pronoun "they" symbolizes Raoule's actualization: they have effectively become conqueror and disintegrated gender boundaries.

Subversion of the patriarchy through sex work

Monsieur Vénus critiqued the gender binary by proving that empowerment through masculinity is merely a social construct. Through her macabre depiction of strange love, she

dismantles societal norms to show the reader how privilege can manifest itself. This revisioning of the courtesan novel was a protest to the stereotypical tales of male conquering female.

Rachlide was able to transcend literary bounds by playing on the very bounds that blocked most female writers from doing so. She exploited and exaggerated her status as a young woman and hysteric. By convincing the male figure that she was no longer a threat due to her perceived lack of power, she was able to enter the literary scene. Once she had their attention, she expertly attacked their entire sense of being. And so, Rachilde was, in a sense, a sex worker, without having used her body. The expert tactic of sex work is to appeal to the male desire to provide for women in order to satisfy his ego; once he is hooked, the sex worker is then the one who is really running the show, while the male thinks that he is in control because of his (socially constructed, and thus false) position of authority.

And so, I argue that Rachilde, perhaps without intending to, made an even bigger contribution to sex worker discourse, not just by depicting sex workers from a more humanistic and dynamic perspective, but by subverting the patriarchy through sex work. As I will discuss in my concluding chapter, efforts to silence the sexually liberated female have never ended. By the same token, efforts like Rachilde's to dismantle the patriarchy and empower the sexually liberated feminine have continued to grow in force. It is by studying these moments in history that we can gain a better understanding of their existence today.

Conclusion: Then and Now

As well as being constraining, literature can also provide a medium for agency. It offers a way for its authors to rewrite experiences that have been written for them. The *fin-de-siècle* portrayal of sex work in literature was largely dominated by men who authored their fear of the power of feminine sexuality and their desire to conquer the female body. These works of literature reflected the patriarchal and misogynistic culture in which they took place. They sought to reinforce the authority of male figures of power manifested in authors, scientists, and doctors and maintain the oppression of female figures who were their subjects of study. Their goal was to ultimately silence the voice of the female writer, the voice of the sex worker, and by extension, the feminine voice in general.

Émile Zola's *Nana*, the most canonical novel about sex work, depicts its protagonist Nana with binary and contradictory qualities of naive and powerful, gross and intoxicating, shallow and master-manipulator. It ignores the qualities that would have been necessary to achieve the financial success and social control that Nana and the real-life courtesans she represented managed to reach. The novel does not delve into Nana's true emotional state and instead objectifies her on paper, ending with her gruesome and shameful death, leaving the reader to infer that she got exactly what she deserved. *Nana* reflects the standard patriarchal depictions of sex work from the *fin-de-siecle* era.

Feminist counter-discourses emerged from these slanderous novels to broadcast the voice of sex workers and those who fall outside of the heteronormative hierarchy in a way that is more authentic and dynamic. Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* and Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique*, while very different novels in comparison to one another, each offer feminist counter-portrayals to works like *Nana* by offering a humanistic depiction of the sex worker and allowing the sex

worker to have a voice beyond the role she served in the patriarchal agenda. *Idylle Saphique* gives visibility to the queer sex worker and expresses the impossibility of any queer woman during this era surviving peacefully, even those with extreme privilege and wealth. It delves into the trauma that sex workers endured while also depicting the many positive aspects of the life of a courtesan. These varied viewpoints serve to allow the reader to view the sex worker as a human being living a subjective and unique experience, unlike the binary depictions offered in works like *Nana.*

Monsieur Vénus effectively critiques the gender binary, making the comment that men and women are not inherently one way or the other; it is the societal structures that we have in place which create the heteronormative hierarchy that seeks to oppress all but some. The novel uses the normally confining diagnosis of hysteria to subversively liberate the protagonist to whom it belonged to transcend gender roles. This effectively points out the flawed and illogical nature of the hysteria diagnosis while also rewriting the story of the hysteric. It offers visibility to the feminized male sex worker and shines a light on the dehumanizing nature of the masculine role in traditional romantic relationships. Authors like Liane de Pougy and Rachilde broke oppressive boundaries which sought to silence their voices. While neither identified with the feminist movement of their time, the literary works they produced paved the way for future feminist thought.

The conquering of feminine sexuality, the silencing of the sex worker, and her slanderous depiction in public discourse certainly did not end after the *fin-de-siècle* period. The erasure of feminine sexuality is beyond borders and history. By analyzing the works of literature which I discussed in this thesis, and the social and political location of the authors and their texts, we can gain a better understanding of this seemingly endless phenomenon. While *fin-de-siècle* modes of

silencing and controlling women were more effectively executed by scientific reports and popular literature, contemporary control is rooted in the criminalization of prostitution under the guise of rescue efforts. Instead of deducing alternative sexuality (or even just feminine sexuality) as a result of an emotional disorder like hysteria, efforts to eradicate sex work of the present-day seek to criminalize sex work and imprison sex workers.

Yet, with hateful forces of oppression also comes resistance efforts. In 1975, hundreds of sex workers in Lyon, France, organized a protest against the criminalization of prostitution and harsh treatment of sex workers. They occupied churches in the city and demanded they would stay until prison sentences against sex workers were lifted. This protest sparked various others of its kind around the world throughout the seventies and eighties, and sex worker advocacy groups proliferated globally. The First Whores' Congresses was held in Amsterdam in 1985, discussing advocacy and support for sex workers. In Bolivia in 2007, around 35,000 sex workers came together to protest violence and brutality from citizens as well as the police. In protest of the silencing and erasure of the sex worker, many of the protesters sewed their mouths shut (Smith and Mac).

Yet, similar to the tumultuous path of varying social progress and setbacks of eighteenth and nineteenth-century France, the modern-day liberation of those who fall outside of the heteronormative hierarchy has not been one of steady incline in the most recent centuries. In the United States, the SESTA/FOSTA "Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act" was passed in 2018, which deemed that any online platform that allowed sex workers to advertise their services would be charged with human trafficking. This law effectively shut down all websites that full-service[16] sex workers used to market their services, forcing them to resort to more dangerous

[16] Explicit prostitution

types of sex work like working outdoors.[17] Sex workers no longer have platforms to communicate with one another when they have been raped, robbed, or assaulted by clients.

FOSTA is an example of how rhetoric can be used to manipulate public sentiment in a way that causes harm to marginalized communities; when reading the title of the act, "Fighting Online Sex Trafficking Act," one may think, "Of course I support abolishing sex trafficking, so I support this enforcement." However, the reality is that countless studies have proven that not only has FOSTA caused an increase in violence against sex workers, it harms actual trafficking victims by grouping them with sex workers; essentially labeling an act that is not consensual as being consensual. Sex trafficking is kidnapping and rape while sex work is a consensual act between two adults in exchange for capitol (and a profession that is currently illegal). By being identified as sex workers, trafficking victims are less able to seek help from law enforcement who are supposed to be protecting them.

FOSTA has had enormous ripple effects in silencing the sex worker community. Nearly all social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and many other smaller platforms have been shadowbanning[18] sex workers, deleting their comments about sex work, and deleting their entire accounts through algorithms which deem an account to have violated community guidelines. The majority of this erasure is not of sex workers advertising services but mostly sex worker-run community pages meant to offer emotional support, communicate stories or locations of dangerous clients, help sex workers understand their legal rights, and share important resources for mental health, addiction, and physical wellbeing. This means that for the millions of sex workers who use social media as a community space, they now struggle in connecting

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[17] Soliciting clients directly off the street, usually without knowing them.

[18] Shadowbanning means their account may still technically exist but users cannot search for their page and their posts do not show up in the algorithm of stories and posts, thus greatly reducing visibility.

with peers for support. This is especially harmful during a pandemic when nearly everything is conducted online.

The intention of the criminalization of sex work is not one of safety; it is to control the female body, in the same way that patriarchal figures in the *fin-de-siècle* era sought to control and conquer the female body through scientific reports and popular literature. Journalist and sex worker Melissa Gira Grant explains in her book, *Playing the Whore:*

> The sex work debate, no matter how sedate and sympathetic its interlocutors claim to be, is a spectacle. It attracts an audience with the lure of a crisis- *prostitution sweeping the nation!*- and a promise of doing good by feeling terrible. Sad stories about sex work are offered like sequins, displayed to be admired and then swept off the stage when the number is done. As a treat, they may even decide to invite a token whore to perform (Grant 35).

The performing whore Grant is referring to is the figure of the sex worker that anti-sex work activists use to prove their point- the degraded and controlled hooker, whose photo is usually sexualized to be even more sensational and attract more attention- paradoxically, objectifying her even further. They speak for her, ask invasively rude questions and craft answers that support their agenda.

Sex workers' stories are told again and again by people who are not sex workers, who do not listen to sex workers, and who do not care about sex workers, other than the control they seek to retain over their bodies. This dynamic is exemplified in Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus:* Similar to Raoule's violent anger towards Jacques when she learned he had been assaulted by Raittolbe, contemporary society's control of sex workers is not out of true compassion, but out of wanting

to retain an object which they believe belongs to them. What the rescue industry really wants is to control the feminine body and to be able to congratulate themselves for doing so.

Not recognizing sex work as legitimate work reinforces the idea that sex work is wrong, and that sex workers' lives don't matter. As discussed in my chapters on the novels *Idylle Saphique* and *Monsieur Vénus,* when society treats sex workers like their identities are inherently wrong, it also sends the message to the rest of the world that they are less valued. The scene in de Pougey's *Idylle Saphique* with Annhine and Flossie's fiancé, Will, speaks to this stigma. Will solicits Annhine's services only to expose her identity as a prostitute in order to shame her in front of Flossie in the hopes that Flossie will then discontinue her relationship with Annhine. Denoting the sex worker as "other" sends the message to the rest of the world that it is okay to inflict violence upon them, since their existence is a problem. Stigma against sex workers is the main cause of violence against sex workers.

What is stigma against sex workers rooted in? Why have nearly all societies, past and present, leaned towards stigmatizing sex workers? This thesis arrives at the conclusion that the stigmatization of sex workers is really part of a problem that is bigger and more deeply rooted than stigmatizing someone for their profession: what it is in actuality is wanting to abolish the sexually liberated feminine figure.

The United Nations has called for a global end to the criminalization of sex work; the International Labor Organization recognizes sex work as valid labor; Human Rights Watch calls for the decriminalization of sex work, as does Amnesty International and The World Health Organization. All of these organizations, whose missions are to establish facts in order to protect human rights and livelihood, have conducted and researched the actual lives of sex workers and the conditions of sex work and have concluded that the criminalization of sex work is in fact

harmful. Yet, harsh tactics of policing, harassing, and imprisoning sex workers are still prevalent globally. The justification is that sex workers don't actually know what is good for them. Grant explains, "She's often accused of not being capable of sharing the truth of her own life, of needing translators, interpreters. But the part of telling the truth here is refusing to conform the story to narrow roles- virgin, victim, wretch, or whore- that she did not herself originate" (Grant 33). Instead of forcing sex workers to say what we think they should say, and act how we think they should act, we should listen to their stories from a nonjudgmental perspective and respect them as human beings.

Virginie Despentes, French sex worker, activist, and novelist, writes in her book, *King Kong Theory,* that she largely credits her positive experience in sex work to reading the works of "pro-sex American feminists such as Norma Jane Almodovar, Carole Queen, Scarlot Harlot, or Michelle Tea." She continues,

> It is no accident that none of their books have been translated into French, that Peterson's *The Prostitution Prism* is not widely available despite being a major work, or that Claire Carhonnet's *J'ai des choses à vous dire* is hardly read. The theoretical desert to which France has banished itself is strategic- prostitution must be kept in shame and darkness in an effort to protect the traditional family unit (Despentes 78).

The preservation of the family unit was the same rhetoric used in France during the *fin-de-siecle* era to justify robbing women of their autonomy. What this translates to is when women are dependent on traditional family units for survival, patriarchal control is reinforced, and the cis-het man can retain his privilege. Thus, the propaganda that sex work is inherently wrong and harmful is maintained in order for patriarchal forces to accomplish this. In both past

and present, this is accomplished by silencing the voice of the sex worker, the sexually liberated feminine figure, or any person that falls outside of the heteronormative hierarchy.

If the problem we have lies in the silencing of these voices, the solution seems to lie in amplifying them. All three of the novels I analyze in this thesis briefly depict the protagonist of each book referring to themselves in another fictional book- a novel within a novel. While the *Nana* novel reference reflects the classic patriarchal figure of authority speaking for its subjects, the *Idylle Saphique* and *Monsieur Vénus* novel references each reflect the desire for their feminine subjects to reclaim their voice. Despite the different styles and intentions of each novel, the fact that each author chose to discuss its protagonists as characters within fictional novels speaks to the way that identity was so shaped by literature during the *fin-de-siecle* era. Literature produces culture- Western culture has been and still is deeply entrenched in this hatred of the sexually liberated woman and alternative sexualities.

In analyzing these novels, my hope was to provide insight into what is behind the stigmatization of feminine sexuality. My conclusion is that it is the fear of the loss of control that men experience when so entranced by the body they seek to conquer. It is this power that feminine sexuality holds which threatens the patriarchal forces in place.

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