

Teaching Ideas

How to use this resource

Encourage your students to follow our research journey by reading through the resource.

They will encounter a selection of prompt questions and activities as they go through, which will encourage them to reflect on what they are reading.

Ideas for comparison: Degas / Baudelaire ('Les Yeux des pauvres') / Maupassant ('La Confidence')

Knowledge and communication

- Both Baudelaire and Maupassant's texts seem to speak to what Jane Munro calls 'the psychological chasms of gender-based antipathy'.
- In Baudelaire's prose poem, heterosexual love is undermined by the drama of class difference and the supposed impossibility of communication – the poet–narrator's expectation of heterosexual reciprocity is foiled.
- For Maupassant, knowledge is stratified along gendered axes. His short story turns on a knowingness born of female homosocial complicity – here, the product of conversation – set against a male failure to understand relations between women. The marquise's plot relies precisely on her understanding of her husband's jealousy and his sense of both property and propriety – she weaponizes her knowledge of his insecurities. If the majority of the piece is structured as a dialogue, a small number of details are provided by a narrator external to the plot. What, then, are we to make of this kind of knowledge?
- Conversation between the two women as an ironic counterpoint to the marquise's husband's attempt to control with whom she interacts: 'il ne m'a plus laissée causer avec personne'
- Do we see any kind of (female homosocial) reciprocity in Degas's painting? What are the stakes of a male artist's depiction of a conversation between women?
- 'By the middle of the nineteenth century, conversation between individuals was being singled out as a facet of modern life that offered an especially fertile subject for the artist.' (Jane Munro)
- The limitations of empathy: 'In Au Café [...] the woman holding the flower is shown to listen intently to her companion's apparently troubled monologue; for all that, she remains on the periphery, partially excluded from the picture plane much as she is locked out of her friend's despair. Not just because she is dressed in black and painted in 'dead' colour do we sense a profound, inconsolable, melancholy; if there is a 'drama', it is perhaps that of the human condition, and the woman's alienation from the urban environment she inhabits.' (Jane Munro)

Friends and lovers: the spectre of prostitution

- In Maupassant, the heterosocial rapidly shifts into the heterosexual: the marquise recounts to her friend how she confides in Baubignac ‘tout ce que j’avais sur le coeur’, exaggerating her husband’s unpleasant character only for her confidant (who is, of course, not her true confidante) to become her lover. The ambiguity of the French ‘ami/e’ takes on its full force here ‘Moi, je disais : « Oh ! mon pauvre ami... mon pauvre ami ! » Il répétait : « Ma pauvre amie... ma pauvre amie ! » – et il m’embrassait toujours... toujours... jusqu’au bout.’
- Once the line has been crossed, Baubignac, too, is swiftly consigned to the scrap-heap of heterosexual relations: ‘il ne vaudrait pas mieux que mon mari’.
- The marquise frames her relationship with her husband as awkwardly situated between love and friendship; this, it is suggested, lies at the root of their conjugal unhappiness. In his anger and disappointment, he makes allegations of sexual impropriety, a meeting point of heterosexual unhappiness and homosocial rivalry.
- ‘Quand je l’ai épousé, je savais bien qu’il était laid, mais je le croyais bon. Comme je m’étais trompée ! Il avait pensé, sans doute, que je l’aimais pour lui-même, avec son gros ventre et son nez rouge [...]. Les hommes, vraiment, se font de drôles d’idées sur eux-mêmes. Quand il a compris que je n’avais pour lui que de l’amitié, il est devenu soupçonneux, il a commencé à me dire des choses aigres, à me traiter de coquette, de rouée, de je ne sais quoi.’
- ‘Figure-toi que ce misérable-là me traitait de... de... je n’oserai pas dire le mot... de catin !’
- ‘[A] mistress willing to exhibit herself on a ‘terrace de cafe’ in the 1860s can only be a *demi-mondaine*, i.e. a high-class tart – not a street prostitute but an actress or an artist’s model, say, and a woman, therefore, very probably of working-class origin herself, putting on airs for her own pleasure and/or the good of her trade...’

Ross Chambers, ‘Baudelaire’s Paris’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. by Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 101-16 (pp. 112–13)

- Speculation as to the character of the women in Degas’s painting:
- ‘[C]afés were also places of assignation and solicitation, and, like brasseries, recognised as hot beds of clandestine prostitution. These associations have led to speculation that the women depicted in the Fitzwilliam picture are prostitutes, their unchaperoned presence in a public place signaling their availability to a prospective male clientèle, even if there is little in their outward bearing or behaviour to sustain such a reading.’ (Jane Munro)
- NB. ‘Comparison with Degas’s other café scenes of around the same date would seem to confirm that the Fitzwilliam painting was probably not intended as an image of prostitution.’ (Jane Munro)

Space: interior and exterior

- What is the significance of the café setting of the prose poem? Is this cross-class drama Baudelaire’s way of gesturing towards the democratic potential made possible by the spaces of modernity? Or is it, rather, a critique of these very spaces?
- ‘If “Les Yeux des pauvres” is a poem about the boulevard, it is also a poem about a romantic rupture, and one of its main interpretive challenges lies in determining the connection between the action and the setting.’

Maurice Samuels, 'Baudelaire's Boulevard Spectacle: Seeing Through « Les Yeux des Pauvres »', *Yale French Studies*, 125/126 (2014), 167–82 (p. 168)

- Jane Munro highlights the disjunction between the apparent lack of interaction between the women in Degas's painting and its setting – that is, 'a more-or-less fashionable meeting place whose purpose was, ironically, to promote sociability among the urban population.'
- Maupassant's short story, on the contrary, is very much a drama of the interior – does this seem to facilitate communication and closeness?

Class

- In Baudelaire's prose poem, class difference precludes male homosocial identification between the poet-narrator and the father of the poor family, who is likened to a nursemaid/nanny ('Il remplit l'office de bonne et faisait prendre à ses enfants l'air du soir') – in this context, children are apparently not proof of virility.
- There's an irony here, given that this family is clearly not part of the nanny-employing classes ☐ undermines poet-narrator's initial, quasi-admirative characterization of the father as a 'brave homme' (under-translated by Waldrop as 'fellow'; perhaps closer to 'good chap')
- Maupassant's marquise (an aristocrat) uses charity as a pretext to get close to Baubignac: '– Tu as été chez lui ? Sous quel prétexte ? – Une quête... pour les orphelins...'

Invitations to interpretation

- Maupassant's short story employs dramatic irony to provide the reader with information to which not all the characters (i.e. the marquise's husband) are privy. The conclusion is unambiguous, and in this respect, the passage has perhaps less narrative potential than Baudelaire's prose poem and Degas's painting.
- Degas's painting refuses to provide definitive answers to the questions it prompts: he 'creates an opacity in the reading of the image which allowed him to insinuate, rather than define the narrative and keep the viewer guessing...' (Jane Munro)
- Baudelaire's prose poem, too, invites us to question our own reading, leaving a trail of ironic 'crumbs' for the reader to follow to suggest that the poet-narrator's account should perhaps not be taken at face value. For example:
- What are we to make of the hypocrisy of the speaker, disdaining a café on the new boulevards whilst nonetheless enjoying what it has to offer?
- Are his accusations of 'feminine impenetrability' not, rather, motivated by frustration and misogyny, angered by the woman's refusal to unambiguously confirm his reading of the situation? A desire for male mastery, born of heterosexual relations, colours the passage.
- Note the jarring transition between the opening accusations and the remark, made in the following lines, that 'our thoughts were thoughts in common and that our two souls from now on would be one'.
- The wide-eyed stare of the poor family, we might reasonably speculate, is more the product of fatigue and hunger than admiration for the glitzy interior of the café, undermining the speaker's confident 'reading' of what their eyes express.

- ‘Although we’ve been told to expect a poem about the impenetrability of women, the text [shapes] up [...] as more an ironic comment on the limited vision of its male narrator, whose assured judgments about his class and others seem dubious while his insensitivity is plain. The poem has begun to show us that there’s another side to ‘impenetrability’, and that things like judgment and sensitivity, the prerequisites for an empathetic understanding of others, are relative to one’s own social situation. The narrator can literally afford to immerse himself in aesthetic issues, waxing critical of the cafe’s glitz and assuming condescendingly that the poor family is admiring its tawdry splendours, but failing to notice the gap that divides him from them or to reflect that, to middle–class eyes, a poor family’s thoughts may be as ‘impenetrable’ as he thinks women are to men...’ (Ross Chambers, p. 112)