

Women and Dance: Seduction and Corruption in 19th century French Literature and Art

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The female body has been of interest to artists throughout history, the image of the female body changing with times and cultures. A shift of particular interest to this study is the shift from the view of the female body as one of ethereal beauty in the Romantic era that took place mid-century when the Realist/Naturalist period gained momentum. When images of the female dancer in the fiction, poetry, and art of the period are isolated, this shift becomes more apparent. The shift mirrors the phenomenon in the dance world of the time which “feminized” the idea of ballet, and not necessarily in an effort to give women their due as ballet artists. Instead, the shift reduces them to the sum total of their bodies as vehicles for the pleasure of the male gaze, and as potentially corrupting influences on the male writer/artist.

As ballet began to be seen as a feminine pursuit in the early 19th century Romantic era, the view of the female dancer changed as well for most of the century; A careful study of the scenes of the waltz and the masquerade ball in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, the figure of the dancer in several of Baudelaire’s poems in his collection of *Les Fleurs du mal*, and the ballerina paintings and sketches of the period by Edgar Degas, reveal how the figure of the female dancer and the female body became linked with the seduction of the male and the corrupting force of the *femme fatale*. Dancers of ballet became inextricably linked to the male nightclub entertainment venues of the likes of the Folies Bergère and Moulin Rouge in Paris. This link became more solidified when women who danced at these venues in order to make money often also were enrolled in the ballet schools of Paris and danced on the stage. Edgar Degas painted these women in his famous ballet scenes, but their bodies are often viewed during the rehearsal phase in

awkward or ungainly positions, a move away from the romanticized view of the female body to a realistic one during the shift to the Realist period in mid-century.

The figure of the dancer also became linked to that of the prostitute, a link that is hinted at in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* when Emma's romantic delusions are shattered between her first dance and waltz at the aristocratic ball to the later masquerade ball that she attends in Paris in a scene reminiscent of the fevered atmosphere of the dance hall. Baudelaire was obsessed with the female body in his poetry collection. Degas, for his part, visited brothels and sketched the female body as not just seductive, but indeed corrupt. Viewed together with his ballerina portraits, the idea of male power in documenting the female body and placing moral claims regarding her corruption and corrupting potential as a *femme fatale* is made clear.

This contradictory attitude towards women is evident in Gustave Flaubert's famous novel, *Madame Bovary*, which follows the life of Emma Bovary as she spirals to her demise. The first ball Emma attends at Vaubyessard becomes the focal point for the rest of the novel and the rest of Emma's life as she persistently remembers it in romantic idealized terms. This ball is unexpected and she described it as "something extraordinary" (*Madame Bovary* 76). The evening was out of the ordinary and very different from the style of life Emma usually lived. She observed that "many ladies had not put their gloves in their glasses" indicating that they would be consuming alcohol along with the men, which was not a commonality in Emma's life (81). Emma wore clothing, danced with strangers, ate food (pomegranates, pineapples, and powdered sugar), and tasted drinks (champagne) that she never would have in her average life (82).

Flaubert explicitly states that "Emma did not know how to waltz" and yet Emma perceives the dance as fast, smooth, and romantic (88). It is highly unlikely that someone who does not know how to waltz would be able to successfully dance with a group of people and not

bump into others and get tangled up with her partner. It would be a clumsy and awkward endeavor, which is not at all how Emma paints the image of her dance with the Viscount:

They turned; all around them was turning—the lamps, the furniture, the wainscoting, the floor, like a disc on a pivot. On passing near the doors the bottom of Emma’s dress caught against his trousers. Their legs commingled; he looked down at her; she raised her eyes to his. [...] And then, still turning, but more slowly, he guided her back to her seat.

(88-89)

Emma’s perception of events is fantasized by her desires and excitement about being a part of an upper-class ball, but it is also important to consider how the details Flaubert provides could have been perceived by the Viscount. When Flaubert writes that “their legs commingled” it is likely that this was an awkward entanglement of limbs due to Emma’s lack of coordination and experience waltzing (88). Between the descriptions painting Emma’s image of a romantic waltz, Flaubert includes phrases to indicate the clumsiness of the performance, such as how the Viscount was “dragging her along” during the dance (89). From the Viscount’s perspective, it is possible that it was an uncomfortable dance that may have very well been slightly embarrassing.

At the end of the dance, Emma’s gesture of covering her eyes with her hands shows her attempt to hold on to the passionate feelings evoked by waltzing with the Viscount. By covering her eyes, she is trying to shield herself from all other sensory stimuli in the room to hold to her glorified perception of the dance she just experienced. If Emma were to open her eyes literally and figuratively, the illusion she cultivates about reality would be broken. For example, just before the dance with the Viscount she notices an apparently illustrious man, the old infirm Duke de Laverdière, with his napkin tied around his neck “like a child” as he spilled gravy on his shirt

(81). Despite this unpleasant portrait of the aged man, all she really sees is a person who “had lived in court and slept in the bed of queens” (82). Emma’s willful blindness to reality, evoked in the gesture of covering her eyes after the dance with the Viscount, is foreshadowed in this scene when the reader learns that “Emma’s eyes turned involuntarily to this old man with hanging lips, as to something extraordinary” (82). The gesture could also be interpreted as one of modesty in which she realizes that she just danced for the first time in the midst of high-class individuals and she is perhaps shocked that she has had this sensuous experience with a man who is not her husband.

However, the description of the Viscount dancing with the other woman is a stark contrast to the romantic dance described of the Viscount with Emma, at least as she has interpreted this dance. When the Viscount waltzes with the more experienced dancer, the performance is portrayed as structured and undynamic. Flaubert describes it as: “she with rigid body, her chin bent down, and he always in the same pose, his figure curved, his elbow rounded, his chin thrown forward” (89) Evidently, Emma appreciates that they are correctly executing the steps of the waltz, but she sees it as a demonstration of accurate academic dancing, lacking the passion and fire of her own dance with the Viscount.

In comparison, at the masquerade ball much later in the novel after Emma has had adulterous affairs with two lovers, Emma takes on an audacious persona and experiences a night of intense dancing and wild music, dancing “all night to the wild tones of the trombones” (474). The apparent gesture of modesty during the waltz early on, where she covers her eyes, contrasts sharply with her wild dancing in this later masquerade ball scene. Unlike the crisp, hauntingly sweet sound of violins she waltzes to at the Vaubyessard ball, at the masquerade ball Emma dances to the wild, bold music of trombones, surrounded by dancers who lack the sophistication

and structure of the Vaubyessard partygoers. While a waltz is mathematical in its symmetry and precision, the masquerade dance portrayed here is chaotic and uncultivated.

However, Emma retains her fear of being associated with the lower class that is evident during her experience at the Vaubyessard ball earlier in the novel. When she sees peasants looking in the window at the Vaubyessard ball, she becomes all the more determined to establish her place in the upper class (86). Emma has a similar reaction at the masquerade ball; she realized that the women were of a lower class and “she was frightened, pushed back her chair, and cast down her eyes” (475). Once again, the emphasis on her shielded eyes highlights her willful blindness to reality, for she cannot face the truth of how far she has fallen on the social ladder with this group of partygoers. She is so disturbed by the presence of these lower-class women that she does not partake in the meal, unlike at the Vaubyessard ball where she was fascinated by the abundance of new sophisticated foods and drinks (475).

The contrast between these two balls has been noted as an intentional reversal to highlight Emma’s descent into the state of mind in which she kills herself. In her study of *Madame Bovary*, Sarah Wester Goodwin likens Emma’s life to the dance of death with the Vaubyessard ball, which is essentially the first step in its choreography. The last waltz of the night “shows Emma just starting to cross a mental and dramatic threshold” that will ultimately spiral into her death (197). The waltz scene with the Viscount at the Vaubyessard ball is the beginning of Emma’s demise because it triggers the creation of an unrealistic fantasy for Emma that she spends the rest of the novel attempting to achieve. The moment she covers her eyes after her dance with the Viscount is when her own death dance begins because she is “trying to retain or to picture what has just happened” and establishes an “intense and disturbing desire to live the story she imagines, modeled on cliches she does not consciously recognize” (214). From this

moment on, from opening her eyes and watching the Viscount and his skilled dance partner waltz together at the ball, Emma has the desire to be in that woman's place herself and spends the rest of her life attempting to fit the mold she perceives of that woman.

This first ball is a pivotal point in Emma's life as the start of her death dance, while the second ball she attends marks the conclusion of her dance and the inevitability of her impending death. Goodwin appropriately describes the two balls as "standing like a pair of parentheses around Emma's life as an adulteress" (199). The first ball triggers Emma's longing for a romantic, lavish life and she consequently embarks on adulterous adventures chasing this dream. The last ball takes place after multiple unfulfilling relationships at which point Emma has expended all her resources that could potentially give her the life she longs for. At the second ball, Emma is exhausted from the death dance she has unconsciously orchestrated for herself and resorts to poisoning herself as the grand finale.

Goodwin describes the motif of this death dance that Emma performs in *Madame Bovary* as "a thinly-veiled warning to women who were disobedient or who abandoned family and domesticity for the implicit eroticism of the ball" (198). Emma abandons the domesticity of her role as a traditional housewife through her adulterous affairs with Rodolphe and Leon. She completely ignores her child, Berthe, and in fact pushes her violently away at one point. Goodwin then goes on to highlight the fact that the second ball Emma attends after the peak of her adulterous affairs with these two men is an opposite reflection of the first ball:

Emma's costume, the mediocre breakfast in a dingy cafe, the third-rate company, and Emma's meditation before an open window at dawn all recall elements of the decisive experience at the chateau—and all are emblems of how far she has fallen. The most significant inversion is in the

nature of her dance: rather than waltzing with an agent of her aspirations,
[...] She leads the dance herself; she makes it her own. (199)

Even the music is significant in showing Emma's loss of control as she nears the end of her life. The clear, expressive notes of the violins at the Vaubyessard ball reflect Emma's passionate desire to shape her future into the luxurious life an upper-class woman. However, the music at the masquerade ball has an entirely different quality. Goodwin describes the vibrating tones of the trombone as having "a threatening and martial intensity" (199). It creates a ritualistic quality representative of Emma's complete demise resulting from her vain attempt to achieve the dream engraved on her heart by the haunting chords of the violins at Vaubyessard.

Although Emma is arguably the protagonist of the novel, Flaubert reveals her body only through the eyes of men, and his description of her character bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the ballerina. Leon's first glimpse of Emma is by the fire, with her ankle and neck exposed to the heat of the flames, and likewise to the heat of passion between her and Leon. The seductive power of her body is clear in the following scene when Léon first lays eyes on her:

With the tips of her fingers she caught her dress at the knee, and having thus pulled it up to her ankle, held out her foot in its black boot to the fire above the revolving leg of mutton. The flame lit up the whole of her, penetrating with a crude light the woof of her gowns, the fine pores of her fair skin, and even her eyelids, which she blinked now and again. A great red glow passed over her with the blowing of the wind through the half-open door. On the other side of the chimney a young man with fair hair watched her silently. (*Madame Bovary* 131)

The fire provides a red glow to her pale skin, which is seen multiple times throughout the novel. By including this seemingly insignificant, Flaubert is purposefully evoking anticipation of Emma's role as a seductress and the "femme fatale" that develops as the plot progresses. Emma's affair with Leon highlights Flaubert's fascination with the dancing female. Flaubert identifies the specific sculpture, the *Dancing Marianne*, under which Leon passes on his way to his seduction by Emma in the Rouen cathedral. In the *Dancing Marianne* sculpture, Marianne is representative of Salomé from the Biblical story in which Salomé is the daughter of Hérodias, Herod's wife. Salomé, Herod's stepdaughter through this illicit marriage, dances before Herod and his court and is asked what reward she would like in return. Hérodias tells her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter (John the Baptist had criticized the marriage and the sinfulness). The beheading is equated in much 19th century art and literature written by men with male castration anxiety, including in the works of Gustave Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes. Although the idea of the fatal dancing Salomé is only beginning to be realized in *Madame Bovary*, the dancing female is clearly one of Flaubert's preoccupations in the novel and is reflected in his other works.

Interestingly, at the time that Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary*, he was also working on a story called "Hérodias," which recounted this Biblical story of Salomé. He published it about two decades after *Madame Bovary*, but we can already see his obsession with the dancing female in *Madame Bovary* through his highlighting of the Dancing Marianne/Salomé sculpture on the Rouen cathedral portal, the scene of Emma's seduction of Léon. "Hérodias" was in the works at the same time as *Madame Bovary*, as seen in Flaubert's travel writings and letters to friends, and it indicates his effort to show the dancing female as fatal to men's desires. In *Madame Bovary*, the sculpture referred to above the portal of Rouen cathedral shows an acrobatic position of

Salomé as she dances before Herod. We can also see the head of John the Baptist presented in the basket to the right.



Photo courtesy: <<https://frenchmoments.eu/west-facade-of-notre-dame-cathedral-rouen/>>

Flaubert must have been fascinated with this idea of the dangerous dancing female figure because he highlights the acrobatic position of the fatal female dancer he refers to in *Madame Bovary* again in his later story “Hérodiades.” In this story, Salomé’s seductive dance is described in detail in the following scene, and we can see how it relates to the Rouen cathedral sculpture:

The dancer was Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who for many months her mother had caused to be instructed in dancing, and other arts of pleasing, with the sole idea of bringing her to Machaerus and presenting her to the tetrarch, so that he should fall in love with her fresh young beauty and feminine wiles. The plan had proved successful, it seemed; he was evidently fascinated, and Herodias felt that at last she was sure of retaining her power over him!

And now the graceful dancer appeared transported with the very delirium of love and passion. She danced like the priestesses of India, like the Nubians of the cataracts, or like the Bacchantes of Lydia. She whirled about like a flower blown by the tempest. The jewels in her ears sparkled, her swift movements made the colours of her draperies appear to run into one another. Her arms, her feet, her clothing even, seemed to emit streams of magnetism, that set the spectators' blood on fire.

Suddenly the thrilling chords of a harp rang through the hall, and the throng burst into loud acclamations. All eyes were fixed on Salome, who paused in her rhythmic dance, placed her feet wide apart, and without bending the knees, suddenly swayed her lithe body downward, so that her chin touched the floor; and her whole audience,--the nomads, accustomed to a life of privation and abstinence, the Roman soldiers, expert in debaucheries, the avaricious publicans, and even the crabbed, elderly priests--gazed upon her with dilated nostrils. ("Hérodiad," in *Trois Contes*)

While in *Madame Bovary* Flaubert indicates a synthesis of the dancing female with the "femme fatale" through Emma, he takes this idea into full bloom in "Hérodiad." This story of Salomé was inspired by Flaubert's own travels to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Greece where he visited brothels and watched exotic female dancers. He returned from this trip and began working on *Madame Bovary*. It was years later, however, when he distilled his ideas on the dangerous dancing female into his story "Hérodiad," one of the three tales published together as *Trois Contes* in 1877.

This portrayal of the dancing female surfaces in *Madame Bovary* through Flaubert's description of Emma exhibiting the delicacy and grace of a dancer; her legs and feet are described with an emphasis on how "the dainty shoe, that had no back to it, was held only by the toes to her bare foot" and Leon "enjoyed the inexpressible delicacy of feminine refinements...these poses of the weary dove" (432). In ballet, graceful movements and a delicate appearance are essential components to the overall projection of an effortless, graceful dance. Much like the romantic ballets (*Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, etc), Emma is presented in static textual images of ballet-type "poses of the weary dove," and consequently is viewed by Leon as a delicate, other-worldly creature.

Later in the novel, Flaubert returns back to Leon's perception of her body as a luxurious temptation when the firelight reflects on her body, and "he found again on her shoulder the amber colouring" and compares her to the "Odalisque Bathing" when he gazes at her pale breasts (432). The figure of the Odalisque is one that male European painters portrayed as an example of the nude female "exotic" temptress of the harem. When Leon looks at her red glow and the whiteness of her breasts, Emma assumes the position of the ballet dancer, exhibiting an unnatural contrast of both purity and temptation just as the ballet dancer exhibits the unlikely combination of both grace and strength. Of course, Flaubert does not let the reader (or Léon) bask in the glow of romantic illusion entirely, because the roasting mutton leg juxtaposed with Emma's leg is startling.

Another significant moment in which Emma assumes the position of the ballet dancer is in the images of her carefully choreographed fingers, neck, and toes by Flaubert when Emma is with Rodolphe, her second lover. In ballet, the use of *épaulement* (the placement of the shoulders, head, and neck) is critical to achieve the desired style and artistry of the movement.

An emphasis on Emma's own use of a form of *épaulement* is evident throughout the novel, in particular when we see her first true act of adultery with Rodolphe. Flaubert describes Emma "with head bowed" and takes note of the intricate movements of her feet on the ground as she listens to Rodolph profess his passionate feelings (262). Flaubert then goes on to express her vulnerable form of the ballet dancers' *épaulement* when he writes about how she "threw back her white neck, swelling with a sigh" (264). This description of her "white neck" indicates Emma's perceived purity just before she gives herself to Rodolphe for the first time in an adulterous manner.

Rodolphe also emphasizes her body parts, but in a more vulgar way. While Charles cares about Emma's well-being and Leon is attracted to her for both her physical attributes and their shared intellectual interests, Rodolphe is merely trying to take advantage of her. For example, Rodolphe's thoughts and intentions are clear in this passage:

"She is very pretty," he said to himself; "she is very pretty, this doctor's wife. Fine teeth, black eyes, a dainty foot, a figure like a Parisienne's. Where the devil does she come from? Wherever did that fat fellow pick her up?" (215).

Rodolphe's predatory male gaze on her body contrasts with the view Charles, her timid and emasculated husband, first has of her. When Charles visits her father at the farm, the narrator notes Charles' perspective: "Between the window and the hearth Emma was sewing [...] she wore no fichu; he could see small drops of perspiration on her bare shoulders" (36-37). And in an erotic role reversal in which Emma's odd "phallic" power over Charles is hinted at, the narrator says:

As it was almost empty she bent back to drink, her head thrown back, her lips pouting, her neck on the strain. She laughed at getting none of it, while with the tip of her tongue passing between her small teeth she licked drop by drop the bottom of her glass. She sat down again and took up her work, a white cotton stocking she was darning. (37)

These images romanticize the female body and give an idealized view by neglecting to show Emma's less attractive, but inevitable, human qualities. By so frequently describing her in these balletic poses, we rarely see Emma described in an awkward, clumsy, or unattractive way despite the fact that every human being has such moments. Just as the ballet dancer deceives the audience by masking the pain and effort of dancing with an outward appearance of effortless beauty, the romanticized images of Emma's body deceive the reader (and the men in the novel) into viewing Emma as a mysterious, beautiful creature who is on another level than the rest of us. Rodolphe is clearly mesmerized, for example, in the following: "Rodolphe, walking behind her, saw between the black cloth and the black shoe the fineness of her white stocking, that seemed to him as if it were a part of her nakedness," (261), and he sees that "her face appeared in a bluish transparency as if she were floating under azure waves" (262).

These romanticized images of Emma's body stand in contrast to other bodily images in the text that actually undermine the stylized view of the human body in Emma's death scene when her romanticized image of death does not come true in reality. She perceives death as quietly falling asleep, believing that she "shall fall asleep and all will be over" (519). But in reality, death is long, painful, and ugly. While previously her chest was described as a pale white breast that attracted men, on her deathbed, her chest is no longer a source of seduction. Now Flaubert describes her torso in terms of "the fearful labouring of her ribs, shaken by violent

breathing,” as she nears the end of her life (529). The contrast of the romanticized poses of Emma in the novel, and the grotesque view of her body on her deathbed demonstrate that death, illness, and decay underly all of the images of the body, no matter how stylized and “perfect” they seem. Flaubert hides nothing of the real toll a death by poisoning will take on the body:

She soon began vomiting blood. Her lips became drawn. Her limbs were convulsed, her whole body covered with brown spots, and her pulse slipped beneath the fingers like a stretched thread, like a harp-string nearly breaking. After this she began to scream horribly. She cursed the poison, railed at it, and implored it to be quick, and thrust away with her stiffened arms everything that Charles, in more agony than herself, tried to make her drink. He stood up, his handkerchief to his lips, with a rattling sound in his throat, weeping, and choked by sobs that shook his whole body.
(519-520)

This description of death plunges the reader into the realism of suffering and death, proving Emma’s romantic idea of death to be highly distorted.

When comparing Emma to the ballerina, this idea of death, illness, and decay underlying the images of her body parallels the use of pointe work to make ballet dancers appear to be floating above the floor as almost fairy-like or ghostly. The feet of ballet dancers are not always an attractive sight, often with bruised or missing toenails, blisters, bunions, and in general, dancing for many hours in the shoes can be painful. However, the outside of the shoe is elegant and the pointe work is a useful technique to achieve a beautiful display of artistic movement in dance. The death, illness, and decay that are underlying all of the images of Emma’s body are also what lies within the ballet dancer’s pointe shoes. Given Flaubert’s efforts to remain a

“realist” writer, it was inevitable that Emma’s demise would be portrayed in the painful decay and death of her once idealized and romanticized body.

Poet Charles Baudelaire and novelist Gustave Flaubert are two important authors who wrote at the same time, and in fact, Baudelaire published his collection, *Les Fleurs du mal*, in 1857, the same year as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Like Flaubert, there is a tension already in Baudelaire's title, *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*), in which the idea of beauty (*fleurs*) is mixed with the idea of evil or stark reality (*du mal*). There is a connection between flowers (which are associated with new life, beauty, and love) and evil reality. Likewise, the title of one of his poems in the collection, “Le serpent qui danse,” (“The Dancing Serpent”) mixes the beauty of dance with the negative connotations of the serpent as the tempter. This connotation is extended to the temptress because the serpent is linked to Eve from the Biblical story of creation. Consequently, the title itself evokes the Western sense of the tempting woman and the idea of the *femme fatale*. An examination of “Le serpent qui danse,” along with other poems by Baudelaire which deal with the male gaze on the dancing female, show how the poet exhibits the same ambivalence Flaubert displays towards women and their bodies when viewed by the male spectator.

The portrayal of the serpent in Baudelaire’s poem combines a frightening creature with a dancing, enticing temptress. The serpent is infused with elegance and beauty through the idea of dance and movement; by the fifth stanza, it is clear that the snake and the woman have become one as a dancer. In this stanza, the reader could view the image presented as either a snake on a stick, or as a dancer whose movements are guided by the choreographer’s baton:

À te voir marcher en cadence,

Belle d'abandon,

On dirait un serpent qui danse

Au bout d'un bâton.

To see you march in cadence,

Oh Beauty of abandon,

One could say a serpent that dances

At the end of a baton. [translated by Dr. Poteau-Tralie]

However, the serpent's/woman's dangerous beauty as seen through the male gaze ["j'aime voir"/ "I like to see"] is clear from the first stanza, when the narrator says:

Que j'aime voir, chère indolente,

De ton corps si beau,

Comme une étoffe vacillante,

Miroiter la peau !

How I love to see, dear indolent one,

like a wavering cloth the skin

Of your beautiful body shimmer. [translated by Dr. Poteau-Tralie]

The description of how her "body stretches and leans" particularly mimics the ballerina stretching and elongating ["Et ton corps se penche et s'allonge" (stanza 7, line 25)]. She is seen as an ambivalent figure of beauty, but also as a temptress who can lead men astray. There is an intense focus on her specific body parts throughout the poem: her skin, her hair, her eyes, her head, her mouth, her teeth. Very similar to *Madame Bovary*, the woman's body becomes a series of body parts as seen through the eyes of the male. We do not see the woman as a whole being, just as moving parts, very much like Rodolphe, Leon, and Charles all see Emma in *Madame*

Bovary. Like Flaubert, Baudelaire presents the woman's body parts as something that draws the man in and has a power over him.

The narrator's use of opposites creates an ambivalent attitude toward this powerful woman. The poem starts by describing her as indolent, implying that she is unmoving and lazy. In a complete contradiction of this statement, Baudelaire goes on to portray her as moving and dancing, comparing her to the waves of the sea. In the fourth stanza, Baudelaire describes her as possessing "eyes where nothing is revealed"/ "Tes yeux où rien ne se révèle," evoking the sense of a mysterious femme fatale and making it clear that he sees her body as a dangerous thing. Through yet another set of opposites, Baudelaire compares her to both iron and gold, implying that this dangerous woman is the purest while also the most impure. With these qualities she has the power to conquer men, an idea that is suggested throughout the poem but becomes unmistakable in the last stanza in which she is described as "bitter and conquering." All through this poem, there is an ambivalence about her power over men that makes him see her body as dangerous. It embodies the tension that male writers like Baudelaire and Flaubert express when they are faced with a woman's beauty and power.

Evidently, women have become inspiration for poetry and literature and take the male beyond the human condition. There is a paradox in these texts because it is the woman's physical body grounded (like the snake in this poem) to the earth and to reality which ironically becomes the springboard for poetic and artistic flight beyond the real. In this poem, Baudelaire constantly mentions the idea of a voyage or journey to the beyond, elicited by the dangerous feminine presence, source of his inspiration and poetic flight. This idea of a voyage is particularly evident in stanza three:

Comme un navire qui s'éveille

Au vent du matin,
 Mon âme rêveuse appareille
 Pour un ciel lointain.

 Like a ship that awakens
 In the morning wind,
 My dreaming soul casts off

 For a distant sky [translated by Amy Allen]

Here, we see a depiction of the woman as compared to a voyage, creating the sense that she is beyond the realm of understanding, comparable to a faraway place one must journey to reach. Any journey brings with it the risk of danger and revolves around voyaging into the unknown. The resulting mysterious aura of the journey, and therefore of the woman, reinforces the idea of the woman as a dangerous *femme fatale* who can overpower men with her mystery and seductive power.

Poetry itself has the power to become like a dance and this is distinctly evident in Baudelaire's works in the *Les Fleurs du mal* collection. In addition to the literal sense in which dance is displayed in "Le serpent qui danse", we see poetry as a waltz, a verbal ballet, in the structure of his poems as the language itself dances off of the page. Baudelaire's poem "Harmonie du soir" is a prime example as a pantoum, a poem made of stanzas that each contain four lines with the second and fourth lines of each stanza becoming the first and third lines of the following stanza. Baudelaire's strategic use of the pantoum structure in the poem is a key component of the success of creating a waltz with words. Critic Suzanne Braswell emphasizes this idea of the pantoum creating the rhythm of a waltz in its structure alone:

In the pantoum "Harmonie du soir," Baudelaire's application of harmony and balanced composition, allied by the suggestion of undulating lines, appears with particular force. Indeed, the traditional form itself calls for a regular pattern of verse repetition whereby the second and fourth verses of the first quatrain become the first and second verses of the second quatrain, and so forth, until the fourth quatrain concludes the cycle. Thus, the verses gradually form an interlacing structure through which rhythmic repetition creates a layering effect that is both visible and sonorous. These effects find their vehicle in Baudelaire's metonymic use of the waltz, to which he alludes in the fourth verse of the first quatrain. There, the allusion to the waltz announces the undulating effects instantiated by the movement of the verses and the rhythmic patterns they trace across the fixed space constituted by the four stanzas of the poem. (34)

The repetition of the verses that Braswell refers to in this passage creates a circular pattern, evoking the rhythmic feeling of dance movements in the reader. The pantoum becomes a figurative way to suggest waltzing and to add the sensory element of touch/movement to the reader's experience of the poem. Braswell equates the movement in the poem to a man and woman dancing: "Within the framework of the waltz metonymy, this suggests a playful joke on Baudelaire's part of a pair of dancers moving in unison with other pairs of dancers, crossing paths in rhythmic formation, as if on the space of a ballroom floor" (35).

Thus, in addition to the figurative indication of dance through these circular repetitious patterns, Baudelaire takes it a step further to suggest waltzing and dancing literally as well:

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir ;
 Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir ;
 Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir ;
 Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige ;
 Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !

Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Here comes the time where vibrating on its stem
 Each flower evaporates like incense;
 The sounds and the scents turn in the night air;
 Melancholy waltz and languid dizziness!

Each flower evaporates like incense;
 The violin trembles like a heart that grieves;
 Melancholy waltz and languid dizziness!

The sky is sad and beautiful like a large altar monstrosity [translated by
 Amy Allen]

The melancholy waltz he describes is a dance, both bitter (melancholy) and sweet (the pleasant connotation of dancing a waltz). Just as we see in “Le serpent qui danse”, there is a contradiction. The dance is beautiful and wonderful, but there is also sadness. In the first stanza, Baudelaire describes incense, a strong-smelling smoke used in religious rituals, as perfume, which something primarily associated with female seduction. This idea of mixing opposite ideas parallels Flaubert’s similar perspectives in *Madame Bovary*. Like Baudelaire, Emma Bovary

mixes the purity of religious incense with the sexual appeal of perfume and cologne that she hungers for in her romantic life. Both authors see the world as opposites that blend together, and, ultimately, both of their works are about women and her power over men.

And just like Emma's dance becomes a dance of death, Baudelaire equates humanity's march toward death as a waltz led by the beautiful but dangerous woman in his poem "Danse macabre." For example, he shows the mix of beauty that life (the woman) entices us with, but which ultimately proves deadly. The woman is first described as "un vivant / a living person" who is attractive and proud, drawing men in with "sa noble stature, avec son gros bouquet, son mouchoir et ses gants / her noble stature, with her big bouquet, her handkerchief and her gloves" (stanza 1, lines 1-2; Translated by Amy Allen). This initial description of the woman is reflective of her outward appearance, but it masks her danger and the death she is dancing towards. Like we see in Baudelaire's other works and in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, there is a strong emphasis on the physical aspects of her body in the poem:

Sa robe exagérée, en sa royale ampleur,

S'écroule abondamment sur un pied sec que pince

Un soulier pomponné, joli comme une fleur.

Her excessive dress in its majestic breadth

Abundantly tumbles down on a slender foot, pinched in

Dolled-up shoes, pretty like a flower. [Translated by Amy Allen]

His elaborate description of the folds of her dress, her tiny feet, and her majestic body project a feeling of intrigue that reflects the recurring theme of the *femme fatale*. At this point in the poem,

the woman is still enticing and beautiful; however, it is soon revealed that she is dancing her way to her demise, and leading us along the way.

A few stanzas in, we see that the striking female dancer has a darker side than is first projected, with references to “Cadavres vernissés” / “varnished corpses” and an emphasis on deathly qualities of her body [stanza 13, line 50]. In contrast to the proud, noble woman presented in the first stanza, Baudelaire now describes how “Ses yeux profonds sont faits de vide et de ténèbres” / “Her deep eye-sockets are made of void and darkness” (stanza 4, line 13, translations by Amy Allen). By fusing the idea of life and beauty presented in the female dancer with cadavers and death, Baudelaire portrays the feminine enticing beauty embodied in the dancing female as a metaphor for its opposite – death.

The ambivalence regarding women that is clear in prose fiction (Flaubert) and poetry (Baudelaire) can also physically be seen in the paintings of ballet dancers by Degas in the latter half of the 19th century. Most viewers’ first impression of his paintings, myself included, is to see the beauty in the artwork: the colors he chooses to use and the small, blurred strokes on the canvas contribute to a sense of movement in the dancers painted within the still frame. A look at some of these paintings shows the duality of beauty and ugliness: like Flaubert and Baudelaire, Degas will not let us fully escape reality.

We see an interesting blend in Degas’ works of the beauty of the female form and an awkward, unattractive portrayal of ballet dancers. Although parts of his paintings show the grace that dancers strive for, he also reveals the fact that they do not always achieve this perfection. Degas emphasizes not only the enticing performance of ballerinas, but also the process of working toward this goal. Interestingly, beauty and awkwardness seem to be counterbalanced better in paintings of multiple dancers compared to those of a solitary dancer. In the paintings

that focus closely on one person, there is no relief from the discomfort, making the dancer appear more awkward and dysfunctional.

As a ballet dancer myself, my attention is immediately drawn to the elegance of the female form, as opposed to the gawky elements of the dancers, in part because this elegance is what I strive to emulate in what I do. When I dance, I visualize the perfect form I want to convey, not the inevitable awkwardness that is needed to get there. As a viewer of the art and as a dancer, I have no desire to dwell on the ugly, uncomfortable parts of ballet, but in Degas's paintings I am forced to. Like Flaubert and Baudelaire, Degas does not let us avoid the undesirable parts of a dancer's reality.

Like other impressionist painters of the time, Degas uses broad brush strokes to create the impression of the eye and the idea of movement. Just as Baudelaire creates a sense of movement through words, Degas creates a sense of movement using brush and charcoal strokes. As we can see in these two paintings, *Dancers 8* and *Blue Dancers*, c.1899, it seems the ballerinas will be in a different position within mere seconds.



Dancers 8

Pushkin Gallery of Fine Art

<https://www.edgar-degas.org/Dancers-8.html>



Blue Dancers, c.1899

https://pushkinmuseum.art/data/fonds/europe_and_america/j/2001_3000/zh_3273/index.php?lang=en

Even the hair of the dancers is swirling and circular, projecting continuous motion. The beauty of the dancers and the feminine colors is countered by the way one dancer in each painting strains to look back and fix her dress. This detail adds a tinge of tension that takes away from the sheer beauty of the image. There is also a similar focus on specific body parts to what we see in *Madame Bovary*, with an emphasis on the neck line, the arms, the collar bones, and the chin.

The resemblance to Flaubert's depiction of the female body in *Madame Bovary* extends to other of Degas' works as well, most prominently *Four Dancers*:



Four Dancers, 1899. National Gallery of Art

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46597.html>

The pale skin of the dancers in this painting parallels the depiction of Emma Bovary's almost transparent skin while the chaotic positioning of the dancers' white arms mirrors the turmoil of Emma's unstable emotions. Furthermore, this painting illustrates Emma's death dance and the haunting verses of Baudelaire's "Danse macabre." The ghostly dancers in Degas' painting can be equated to the "cadavres vernissés" / "varnished corpses," melding life and death in an enticing opposition [stanza 13, line 50]. What appears to be a tidal wave of darkness sets the dancers

apart from the peaceful light in the top right corner of the image, thus reinforcing the idea of dancing from life into death.

The darker side of the dancer's life that Degas indicates here is a point of great interest for the majority of Degas's viewers. Critic Christie Davies, when she was reviewing the exhibition *Degas and the Ballet* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, reflects on the difficult life of the ballerina during Degas' era:

In England, ballet dancers are now perceived as nice upper-middle-class "gels" and have been romanticized in books for female children who then aspire to be like them, much as they would like to own a pony. It was not like that in France in Degas's time. Like artists' models, they were recruited from the poor and scrawny, and even the underage ones were often the sexual play-things of prosperous patrons of the ballet. (51)

By presenting both the beauty and the awkwardness of the dancer in so many of his works, he acknowledges this hardship that most ballet dancers faced at the time. On stage they were beautiful other-worldly creatures who danced with an air of innocence and grace, but off-stage they struggled for money, gave their bodies up to prostitution, and lived in poverty. Davies does note the aesthetic beauty of creating movement on the canvas, despite the emphasis on the less attractive aspects of the dancers, for she argues: "The exhibition *Degas and the Ballet* succeeds in its main objective of showing how Degas's punctiliousness and openness to new styles and technologies shaped his portrayals of dancers. The essence of ballet for Degas was movement: rapid movement, controlled movement, extraordinary and almost unnatural movement" (50). Many critics have argued that given Degas's emphasis, or some would say overemphasis, on the awkward and ugly view of ballet dancers, combined with his portraits of working-class women,

and women in awkward poses as they bathe, as well as his many sketches of naked prostitutes, he is a misogynist who sees women as dangerously beautiful. Others focus more on the formal artistic beauty of his masterful paintings.

Critic John Richardson, in his review of a Degas exhibition for *Vanity Fair*, recognizes the artistic beauty in Degas's works as well as the discomfort triggered by the visual presentation of the dancers as a "revolutionary mix of beauty and brutality." Richardson goes on to examine how the context of ballet during the 19th century impacted Degas's desire to present this blend of formal artistic beauty with the less-than-ideal reality of ballet dancers:

The golden age of Romantic ballet was long since over. By the time Degas turned his attention to it, French ballet could hardly be considered an art form. This played into the artist's hands. There were no great dancers to speak of, and until La Belle Otero appeared, there were no great beauties. On the contrary, photographs confirm that Degas was not exaggerating when he revealed his dancers to have been a depressingly dog-faced bunch. No wonder he preferred to show us a *maître de ballet* teaching a class or conducting a rehearsal rather than a ballerina strutting her stuff. Often, all we glimpse of a performance is the very end, when a dancer takes a curtain call in the unflattering glare of the footlights. And Degas did not take much interest in choreography either. What he enjoyed was deploying dancers in choreographic patterns of his own contrivance. Ballet had sunk to the level of kitschy interludes in operas—interludes that allowed bored operagoers enticing glimpses of women's usually concealed legs. (*Vanity Fair*)

Richardson, as one of the critics who believes firmly in Degas's misogyny, does not mince words in his depiction of the uglier side of the female dancer upon which Degas dwells:

He was not interested in capturing their onstage prettiness. He wanted to portray his "little monkey girls" under stress, "cracking their joints" at the barre, as he said, their youthful spirits crushed, their muscles in agony, their feet raw and bleeding. Degas—a misogynist in a misogynistic society—equated dancers with animals, particularly the racehorses whose musculature he had painted so lovingly in earlier years. (*Vanity Fair*)

Despite the overall critical assessment of Degas as a misogynist, there have been attempts to rehabilitate Degas by some critics. For example, critic Norma Broude believes that neglecting to idealize the female form, especially in that of a dancer, is a positive trait in that it shows women as real human beings. She notes:

In portraiture, then, Degas did not paint women as stereotyped feminine objects but as distinct human beings, emphasizing neither charm nor grace nor prettiness, but rather individual character. This fact often put off his contemporaries and helps us to explain the less than enthusiast response that his portraits sometimes elicited--even sitters and observers who should have known better. (104)

However, even Charles Bernheimer, another critic who staunchly defends Degas's artistic project against charges of misogyny, readily admits that:

Indeed, Degas often portrays top-hatted messieurs, probably members of the notorious Jockey Club who had privileged access behind the scenes at the Opera,

negotiating in the coulisses with dancers from the corps de ballet. Thus he illustrates a double slavery of the danseuse, to the specialized artistic vocabulary of male corporeal scripture and to a capitalist economy of desire, which defines lower-class women as objects of sexual consumption for middle- and upper-class men. The grimacing body--distorted, disarticulated, unstable, even inverted--this "reconstructed" body of "the female animal" is, according to Valery, the victim of Degas's misogyny. (159)

Critics of Degas have still not come to terms with the ambivalence towards women and the female form in motion, much as we have seen in the writings of Baudelaire and Flaubert. With the rise of the Realist/Naturalist period in the mid 19th century, the shift away from viewing the female body as a vessel of exquisite beauty (which was the common view during the Romantic era) in novels, poems, and painted artwork becomes apparent. After examining the isolated images of female ballet dancers' bodies in Degas's works, one could argue that this shift demotes women to merely a sum of their individual body parts in terms of how they provide pleasure through the eyes of men. Thus, the potentially corrupting influences these seductive female bodies have on male writers/artists is a common theme in the works of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Degas.

How exactly these potentially beautiful women are a threat to the male writer and artist is evident when we take into consideration the way in which these men are drawn to female body for inspiration, and how they use women as an opportunity to leave reality through a focus on beauty. However, the "real" constantly interrupts that process as reality impinges upon their romanticized desires. Furthermore, these women truly were dangerous to men in both a physical and a psychological sense; in fact, both Baudelaire and Flaubert contracted syphilis from their

frequent interactions with prostitute women in the brothels. The corrupting influence of the female body also impacted the artist's/writer's sense of their superiority over the common human condition, particularly over the female, the lowliest creature on the social ladder. Although women were subjugated in this era, they threatened to take control of these men's sense of themselves and their masculine creative power, something that these men evidently could not fully control faced with the enticing power of the female. The works of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Degas put this struggle in perspective for modern readers/viewers, adding a complex layer to the idea of the female form and the socially constructed definition of beauty. For ultimately and ironically, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Degas all found a way to see beauty in ugliness.

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