The Struggle between the Domestic and Desire: Bourgeois Women’s Role in the Modern Market

Abstract

The Industrial Revolution brought with it changes in manufacturing, advertising and social order, which in turn spurred a consumer revolution that took hold of Paris in the late nineteenth century. This essay examines this culture of consumerism and the anxieties that came with it—in particular, anxieties about the effect that the market had on the moral standing of bourgeois women. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, this issue is discussed in the context of two period works from separate fields, one, an advertisement for “L’Artisan Moderne,” created by Toulouse-Lautrec in 1894, and the other Emile Zola’s immensely popular novel of 1880, Nana. Through the lens of these two works we can see two different views of female consumers from a nineteenth-century standpoint. This essay then draws on the work of present-day historians to explore changes in the marketplace that occurred during this period, including new methods of advertising and the development of department stores, as well as accounts of how men viewed women in the context of these changes and speculations as to why women behaved the way they did during this period. Examples from Nana and the “L’Artisan Moderne” poster are integrated to illustrate and reinforce these points.

Following the Industrial Revolution in France there was a great deal of ambivalence over the rampant consumerism that had taken hold of Parisian culture. For some this was a sign of economic prosperity and an indication of greater equality between the classes, but for others it was a divisive force which marked increasing ego centrism and corruption in the population. In particular there was growing concern over the effect that exposure to the marketplace had on women. These anxieties are reflected in Emile Zola’s 1880 novel Nana, which condemns female consumerism by linking it with extreme vanity and even adultery. Though less blatantly critical, an advertisement for “L’Artisan Moderne” created by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in 1894 echoes similar sentiments as it associates the consumption of luxury goods and
services with immorality and the seduction of the marketplace. Put in conjunction these two works reveal many of the misgivings that men had over allowing female desire to range unfettered in the modern market.

The Modern Market

In France, the Industrial Revolution and resulting consumer revolution went hand in hand. Greater productivity resulted in increased income, allowing people to buy more consumer goods, which in turn created a demand for more production. This cycle of ever-increasing production and consumption created tremendous shifts in the social order, with the rate of change becoming most rapid between 1850 and the beginning of World War One (Williams 9). With this increase in income, average workers were not only able to buy more and better quality essentials like food and fuel, but they were also more likely to have a greater percentage of money left over for discretionary spending. For instance, in 1850 the average working-class family spent 80 percent of their income on food, but by 1905 food expenditures had dropped by 20 percent (Williams 10). With this increase in discretionary income we see the rise of the middle class and a complete shift in the market as more families now had the opportunity to make choices about how to spend their money. Simultaneously, the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution meant that existing goods could be produced at a lower cost while a slew of new consumer products were continuously introduced to the market (Williams 9).

The significance here is not just that there was increased consumption, but that an entirely new kind of consumption emerged. Before the Industrial Revolution, people used very little currency and instead relied heavily on bartering to obtain household goods they could not produce themselves (Williams 2–3). As production moved out of the home or small workshop and into factories, currency became essential for the payroll, and by 1860 deposit banking for individuals emerged and regulated personal credit was introduced to the market (Williams 10). With the shift to factories we also see mass production of consumer goods and new retail venues along with new modes of marketing to accommodate them.

In 1852, the first department store opened in Paris, marking a huge transformation of consumer culture (Williams 66). Compared to the small boutiques, which prevailed prior to the consumer revolution by selling specialized goods to a select upper-class clientele, department stores sold mass-produced products in large volumes to a wide variety of people from the middle to upper classes (Williams 3). One of the most important differences between boutiques and department stores was that department store prices
were fixed, while in independent boutiques prices were generally negotiable and it was customary to haggle over prices (Williams 66). This dynamic created a somewhat adversarial relationship between shopkeeper and buyer in boutiques, while in department stores the consumer was allowed to more leisurely browse through items (Tiersten 30). Shopping then became a form of leisure and entertainment that preoccupied a larger segment of the population more than ever before.

Marketplace Competition

Aside from increased income, there were also several social factors that turned the French—Parisians in particular—into a culture obsessed with the consumption of material goods. As we see demonstrated in Nana, the display of material wealth was crucial in indicating one’s rank within the Parisian social hierarchy. For instance, once Nana establishes residence in the Avenue de Villiers she becomes extremely confident in confronting Lieutenant Philippe Hugon, saying “...if he thinks he’s come to a nobody’s, the drawing-room will astonish him. Yes, yes, take a good look at everything, my friend; it’s all genuine. It’ll teach you to respect the mistress” (Zola 303). This scene shows that it is Nana’s surroundings rather than her actual position that gain her respect in society. Had she been surrounded by shabby furnishings, relying solely on her character, Nana would surely not have convinced the Lieutenant that she was suitable company for his younger brother. However, by cultivating her public image through carefully curating the items in her drawing room, she is able to convince him of her respectability before she even enters the room to meet with him.

While this sort of material competition has always been a factor in French society, it reached a level of heightened intensity for a much larger segment of the population following the Industrial Revolution. As the nouveau riche tried to establish themselves as equals with the aristocracy through their display of finery, the aristocracy, in turn, used consumer goods to demonstrate an air of distinction in their fashions, which they claimed the bourgeoisie could never achieve due to their baser heritage (Tiersten 8–9). As social mobility increased, these material tokens of status became a more and more sensitive issue, with minor details of dress and decor indicating nuances of social standing (Hiner 1). This is demonstrated throughout Zola’s writing as he describes the most minute details of the characters’ possessions down to the precise type of carriage they ride in and whether their place settings are monogrammed or not.
Meanwhile, as a greater portion of the population was vying for position through the consumption of commercial goods, merchants and manufacturers were also competing in the market. Due to the influx of products on the market, vendors became more aggressive in their advertising, competing for modern customers’ attention. Spurred by advances in chromolithography, advertisers began creating eye-catching, colorful, graphic advertisements that replaced static, black-and-white, text-based ads. One of the criticisms of this new approach was that it sought to manipulate customers’ emotions, rather than appealing to reason (Tiersten 32). Like most modern advertisements, Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster for L’Artisan Moderne follows this same trend. Rather than giving information about the actual services offered, this image instead sets up a visual narrative to pique viewers’ interest and appeal to their fantasies. This shift from reason to emotion parallels the overall shift in the mentality of consumption from necessity to desire, as many shoppers with increased disposable income were for the first time making the choice to spend frivolously rather than spending solely to meet the needs of the home.

**The Modern Shopper**

Due to the Victorian social structure, bourgeois women became the primary consumers in the modern market. It was generally believed that a woman’s place was in the home where she would remain chaste and unpolluted by the public sphere. She would care for the domestic interior, providing a refuge for her family away from the corruption of the outside world (Tiersten 23). As keeper of the home in a culture of social competition, it was her responsibility to provision and decorate her residence in a way that would best demonstrate her husband’s social standing, and as a representative of her family she was expected to cultivate a refined appearance herself (Iskin 35).

In order to fulfill this duty it was necessary for modern Victorian women to venture into the marketplace, but doing so put them in a precarious position. While they were expected to remain utterly pure, the market represented a new segment of the public world where they could be exposed to corrupting influences. This created a great deal of anxiety for bourgeois men as they saw this unavoidable exposure as a threat to the sanctity and stability of the home (Tiersten 25).

This anxiety was further heightened by the pervasive view of women at the time as frail and vulnerable creatures. New determinist models of human behavior lumped women together with the lower classes, characterizing them as “biologically and environmentally predisposed to irrational behavior.” (Tiersten 17). This view reinforced the notion that women, due to their inherent psychological weakness, were “naturally” more susceptible to the
seductions of the market than their “rational” male counterparts (Tiersten 47). In Nana, Zola reiterates this stereotype, presenting Nana as a hyperbolic female consumer, whose actions are constantly dictated by whims and who is repeatedly overcome by bouts of extreme sentimentality (116-117; 165; 198-200; 298-299; 346).

Marketing to Madame

Critics claimed that marketers used new techniques of graphic advertisements and lavish visual displays in department stores to overwhelm the psychologically weak female shopper, disarming her sense of reason to turn her into an impulse shopper (Tiersten 32). Zola conveys the power that visual displays were thought to have over the female consumer as Nana, while walking down the Passage of Panoramas with Muffat, is constantly distracted, punctuating their conversations with exclamations about merchandise that she admires in the store windows (198-200). In a later scene, Muffat goes to great lengths to procure “a set of sapphires for which she had a great longing,” but when he presents them to her she only gives him cursory thanks saying, “Darling, do you think it’s the same one? It looked better in the window!” (Zola 314, 324) Beyond demonstrating Nana’s general flightiness, this episode also communicates the perceived hardships that men experienced at the hands of impulsive women who were influenced by an unscrupulous market.

As noted above, by the 1890s marketers were turning more and more toward graphic advertisements that sought to arouse consumers’ desires and emotions. Though these techniques have proven to be a successful method for advertising to both men and women, at the time they were seen as an especially effective means of manipulating the “irrational passions of the female consumer” (Tiersten 32). Compared to traditional text-based advertising, which tried to convince consumers of the value of a product, modern advertisements “sought to use visual and other sensory stimuli to circumvent the rational faculties and act directly on the sentiment” (Tiersten 33). As we see in Toulouse-Lautrec’s interior design poster, the product itself is all but absent. There are hints of interior elements—the bedspread, curtain, and patterned wallpaper—though their forms are quite vague. Rather than giving a concrete example of what the company has to offer, Toulouse-Lautrec instead conveys a cheerful feeling with bright colors and loose, playful forms. The vantage point of the scene implies that the viewer could be perched on the edge of the woman’s bed, conveying a sense of intimacy, yet the scene is not entirely comfortable because of its questionable subject matter. Together these elements evoke an energetic and edgy-yet-cozy feeling, conveying a style
that the interior designer has to offer. That said, it gives no guarantee of quality and does not speak to the actual realities of the market. This image is antithetical to the rational approach esteemed by bourgeois French Republicans as it relies purely on sentiment and the manipulation of desire in order to sell products.

Moral Dilemma

Ideally, the woman’s role as shopper was to fulfill the needs of the home, but in the context of Victorian social expectations and under the influence of modern advertisements, the boundary between need and desire was somewhat murky (Tiersten 39). The term “luxury” implies excess and the non-essential, yet it could be argued that in a culture where material goods indicated social status, luxury goods are, in fact, necessities. In a society where appearing in out-of-date or homespun fashions could tarnish a family’s reputation, it would have been understandably difficult to distinguish which expenses were actually for the benefit the family and which were merely impulsive and selfish purchases. Shopping was also becoming a more indulgent activity overall as merchants tried to woo their customers with flattery, comfort, and visual spectacle (Tiersten 29–30). The rapid growth of department stores and the immense popularity of the World’s Fairs (where by 1855 price tags accompanied almost every industrial marvel) clearly indicate that shopping was evolving into a form of entertainment (Williams 59).

The choices women were faced in interacting with the market and the ambiguity of necessity versus indulgence turned shopping into a social and moral dilemma, wherein less virtuous women who gave in to their impulses and marketplace seduction were accused of squandering men’s earnings and debasing the household. This is the whole story of Nana. While her possessions do initially elevate her social standing, her impulsiveness and inexhaustible longing for luxury goods inevitably lead to the annihilation of multiple fortunes. Nana’s extreme expenditures and consequences are out of proportion with the realities of bourgeois consumption, but this exaggeration gives the story a legendary quality, making it a sort of satirical fairy tale with a clear moral message: indulgence of the impulsive female consumer only leads to male ruination.

At times Zola vacillates between characterizing Nana as a vindictive man-eater who carelessly and cruelly destroys her lovers and, alternately, as an oblivious hedonist who simply does not understand the burden she imposes as she “look[s] upon herself as a model of economy” (Zola 200). This is an intriguing dichotomy as it is somewhat forgiving of the indulgent female
consumer, allowing that she may not be knowingly and deliberately causing hardships for her husband. At the same time it is condemning since the competing view is that she is completely deluded.

According to an article that appeared in the woman’s magazine *La Mode Pratique* in 1893, obliviousness about the family budget was actually fairly common among bourgeois women (Tiersten 35). While some financial issues may have been the result of pure selfishness, it seems that many over-expenditures were due in a large part to a lack of education about budgeting. The introduction of formalized lines of personal credit at this time further complicated matters. Whereas before there was concrete limit to the budget, credit allowed consumers to spend far beyond their means (Williams 92–93). This was an especially treacherous issue given that the social mobility of the era provided an incentive to live beyond a sustainable level in hopes of inflating the family’s perceived social status.

**Vanity and Self-interest in Consumption**

A major issue among male critics was not just the size or quantity of expenditures but the motivations behind purchases. According to social constructs, women would ideally enter the market only to provision the home, avoiding consumption rooted in self-interest. However, many contemporary commentators claimed that exposure to the new consumer marketplace cultivated women’s “baser instincts of egotism, vanity and pleasure seeking” (Tiersten 4). Individualism inherent in the capitalist market was seen as a corrupting force over women, whereas male self-interest could be “a socially constructive force producing goods or profits” (Tiersten 2). Female self-interest in consumerism was a major issue, critics claimed, as it resulted in excessive waste and neglect of family and social duty (Tiersten 4).

This disdain for female egotism is reflected in Muffat’s reaction to Nana’s scene of blatant self-indulgence. “One of Nana’s delights was to undress herself opposite her wardrobe, which has a glass door in which she could see herself full length. She would remove everything and would then become lost in self contemplation...absorbed in a love of herself” (Zola 204). This feminine self-love was likely all the more despicable because it assaulted the male ego. In this bout of feminine selfishness Nana is completely indifferent to her lover’s presence. “It wasn’t for the benefit of others that she did it; it was for her own” (Zola 205). After a time this act of vanity becomes intolerable to Muffat to the point where, in a fit of exasperation and disgust, he assaults the self-absorbed woman, throwing her violently to the ground (Zola 207).
In the critic’s mind it was this wonton self-love rather than social necessity that spawned Parisian women’s preoccupation with fashion. Louise de Salles explained in an 1892 article for *Paris-mode*, “she adorns herself because she sees herself as a sacred icon” (Tiersten 36). Consumed by her own vanity, it was believed that the impulsive female consumer would carelessly put her own self-interests before her family’s well-being, financing her diversions and petty baubles by skimping on household necessities or driving her husband into debt (Tiersten 36).

Sabine, from *Nana*, is a mother guilty of this very trespass against her family. In the throes of an unbridled spending spree, she promptly agrees to sell a magnificent estate she had inherited—a symbol of old money, distinction, and family honor—in order to finance the full-scale renovation of her Paris residence. The new decorations are so extensive that they vanquish all traces of the prior “devout severity” of the old family home, indicating Sabine’s break with her honorable family lineage and self-control within the domestic sphere (Zola 376). In a final show of complete self-absorption, Sabine’s primary concern is not whether her daughter’s fiancé is an appropriate match, but instead whether the wedding contract would be “signed on a Tuesday, to inaugurate the restoration of her town house” (Zola 375). In the deterioration of Sabine’s character from that of restrained virtue to unbridled narcissism, we see the traditional domestic duty of the Victorian woman distorted. Traditionally decorating the home was a feminine responsibility aimed at benefiting the family, but here we see it perverted to the point where it threatens the integrity of the home. Decoration is a major theme throughout the novel. In Nana’s case, she calls on the upholsterer over and over again to the point that her bed literally becomes a golden altar to herself, as her naked form is depicted on the footboard as goddess of the night, showing beyond the shadow of a doubt how her vanity is a key component in her consumerism, which in turn leads to bankruptcy and suffering (Zola 392).

Toulouse-Lautrec’s advertisement also speaks to these themes, but rather than reproaching female consumers on the matter of self-interest, Toulouse-Lautrec appeals directly to this point. In an obvious appeal to vanity, the image of a female consumer is the focus of attention in this scene, placed in a position of dominance as the largest figure at the forefront of the composition. As the pampered woman reclines in bed dressed only in a rather sumptuous nightgown, the designer approaches with tool kit in hand to offer his services. This image parodies a scene of the doctor visiting a sick patient in bed, as the designer is dressed in a white coat much like a traditional lab coat and the shape and size of his tool box mimics a doctor’s bag. The primary message sent by the conflation of these two professions is that L’Artisan Moderne, like the doctor, can ease your suffering and fix what ails you. The key
issue here is that rather than focusing on the home, the designer is instead focused on the woman. The implication of this dynamic is that the woman has hired a designer to benefit herself alone, as symbols of the home are largely excluded from the scene. The only major symbol of the household included in the frame is the maid who looks positively shocked by what is transpiring, suggesting that this is a less than honorable arrangement.

Material Lust

In many ways, anxieties over conspicuous consumption paralleled bourgeois men’s concern for feminine chastity and fears of adultery. Though in the marketplace infidelity was not explicitly sexual, there is a certain betrayal implicit in the actions of the wife who overindulges in her own pleasures to the detriment of her husband. By the account of Henri Boutent, an artist who made his living depicting Parisiennes, “the consumer’s agitation, her rapture upon making a purchase and the surge of remorse she feels afterward tellingly mimic the emotional styles of the adulterous wife” (Tiersten 42). This link between consumption and adultery is rendered explicitly in Nana when, upon Sabine’s return from Les Fondettes, where she presumably began her affair with Fauchery, she “had suddenly developed a taste for luxury, and appetite for worldly enjoyments, which were rapidly devouring their fortune” (Zola 373). As both of these vices develop in unison they can be seen as having their roots from the same moral shortcomings, suggesting that a woman who succumbs to the seductions of material pleasures is likely to succumb to other seductions as well.

The connection between consumerism and deviancy is also suggested in Toulouse-Lautrec’s advertisement. While it may be typical for a doctor to visit a patient in bed, this work is fraught with innuendo as the doctor doubles as a regular professional who has barged into this woman’s boudoir. The lascivious nature of this scene is further conveyed by the man’s somewhat sinister expression and the maid’s stunned dismay. Curiously, the woman in bed does not seem in the least bit concerned but awaits the man’s advances with a rather placid and perhaps vapid expression on her face. This scene can be read as an allegory to the female consumer’s relationship with the market wherein unscrupulous marketers prey upon naïve women who blithely welcome their seductions.

If we delve further into this scenario and ask who the consumer is in Toulouse-Lautrec’s image, the options are limited. Given that she has called upon the interior decorator, she must be in charge of the household and, given her surroundings and the presence of her servant, we know that she is quite
wealthy. Based on her status and authority it is most likely that she is either a married bourgeois woman or a courtesan. If she is the former then this image implies potential adultery, while the latter aligns consumerism with equally reprehensible vices. Given this limited visual information it is not possible to determine which category this woman falls into, though this confusion of the two is not an anomaly since “by the 1890s the negative image of the bourgeois shopper bore a discomfiting resemblance to that of the demimondaine” (Tiersten 43). Though Zola’s *Nana* predates the 1890’s by a decade, surely contemporary readers would have recognized the parallels between negative images of female consumers emerging in popular culture and Zola’s portrayal of the female consumer par excellence: Nana the courtesan.

**Conclusion**

Whether or not bourgeois men’s anxieties were well grounded, there was definitely a significant problem in the way that modern women approached the modern market. In Toulouse-Lautrec’s poster the young woman enlists the services of a designer as doctor, seeking material commodities to help her feel better. Along the same vein, Nana consumes endlessly; yet at the height of her career, with every material desire instantly gratified, “she still retained that empty feeling of stupid idleness, which gave her pains in her inside” (Zola 309). In both of these examples there is a fundamental flaw in their relationship with material goods as both women rely on consumption of commodities for a sense of fulfillment.

While morals, income, advertisements and social expectations were all factors in bourgeois women’s patterns of consumption, there is also an underlying factor in the social structure that could account for the impulsiveness and excessive self-indulgence expressed in the modern marketplace. Octave Uzanne, a contemporary journalist, argued in *La Femme et La Mode* that women acted in a self-interested and childish manner in response to their husbands treating them like a child (Tiersten 52). In the Victorian bourgeois social structure, women were completely dependent on men, not only financially but also socially, as they required the presence of a chaperone to venture into the public sphere. Sexually, women were also treated like children, as they were expected to remain pure even in marriage, viewing intercourse as a duty rather than a source of pleasure and intimacy. Under these conditions, constantly repressing natural drives with limited means of self-expression, women were stifled to the point of suffocation.

The department store, as a feminine realm in the public sphere, stood as one of the only venues in which women could travel unchaperoned and maintain their honor. Likewise, shopping became one of the few socially acceptable activities in which virtuous women could express themselves and experience
heightened pleasure. In this context it is no wonder that materialism was so rampant in modern Parisian society, as consumption was one of the few channels through which these women could vent all their pent up emotions and energies. Given that this suppression was the underlying cause of the irrational, impulsive, and excessive actions of female consumers, it can be argued that it was actually bourgeois men’s own actions and social constructs which were the root cause for their own anxieties.
Works Cited


