

THE PREDETERMINED DETERIORATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN ZOLA'S NANA

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ABSTRACT

As a pillar of the naturalist literary movement, *Nana* by Emile Zola uses pseudo-determinism and vivid descriptions of the female body to recount the tragic life of a high class prostitute Nana Coupeau. Nana's body is transformed into a commodity as she lands the lead role in a play because of her attractive shape and she continues to profit from her body through a career in prostitution. Her role within these two territories is highly sexual and dependent upon her disposition to allow others to obtain ownership of her body either through the male gaze or physical domination. Although Zola pays great attention to the voluptuousness of Nana's figure while she dances on stage and flirts with affluent men at parties, the author also thoroughly details the way in which Nana's body deteriorates as it is gradually destroyed by domestic violence, sexual abuse, motherhood and a sexually transmitted disease. Zola connects the complex oppression of women with the physical deterioration of Nana's body and this connection demonstrates how the sexism, objectification and financial and physical abuse she faces are not mutually exclusive but rather, indistinguishable. The malformations, bruises and puss of Nana's body are brought to life through Zola's detailed descriptions and Nana's physical body and her the conditions of her life become one and the same, for the deterioration of her body aligns with the increasing challenges of her life and both are controlled by men. What grants her financial success and maintains the beauty of her body is the same entity that leads to her economic struggle, body's decay and eventual death – patriarchal capitalism. As patriarchal capitalism is the main system at work, Nana can only exist within society by serving men through performing, prostitution, wifehood and motherhood. The destruction of her body is thus, fixed as Nana's body is a female body attempting to exist within a patriarchal capitalist society that equates women's worth with the economic value of their bodies, but only awards economic value to women who are willing to let their bodies be destroyed by the very means that grant them value and temporary financial success – objectification, sexual use, domestic abuse and motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

Emile Zola's *Nana* details the life of Nana Coupeau as she rises from streetwalker to cocotte, a high class prostitute. Although the novel was an immediate success, the public responded to the book with outrage due to its focus on sexuality and promiscuity. The novel begins with a long scene at the theatre in which Nana is performing and instantly, becomes the object of desire by everyone in the audience. Her movements are sexualized, her promiscuity is the topic of discussion amongst groups of wealthy men, and her identity is reduced to her body. Though this reduction reflects the intersection of gender and economic oppressions women faced, it also introduces Zola's focus on the body within his novel. As a prostitute, Nana has an inevitable economic dependence on men but her body captivates her customers – so much so that they become enslaved by their infatuation with it. Nana eventually destroys every man that pursues her either financially or physically, resulting in multiple bankruptcies and overwhelmingly brutal suicides such as a man burning himself to death. Zola also kills Nana in a gruesome way, detailing the puss and putrid flesh resulting from smallpox. Whereas Zola grants agency to the men in their choosing to sleep with Nana and paying for her services, Nana can only begin to choose which men she sleeps with after sleeping with a higher class man, which proves her to be valuable, and achieving a foundation economic stability from sleeping with lower class men. Her economic dependence is thus assumed, for the only way in which Nana can attain agency is through frequently sleeping with various men.

The presupposition of economic dependence runs parallel to the seemingly predetermined deterioration of Nana's body. Nana's body has worth only through its sexual appeal, which is rooted in her economic value as a cocotte. As the Blonde Venus, she performs for a high class audience and her body is the true spectacle that the show-goers pay to see. She is a performer – both on stage and in bed, and her body is exhibited as an object to be purchased. Nana's existence within these two occupational realms are exclusively dependent on her body and her willingness to let others assume it is theirs, leading to its constant sexualization by the male gaze and later, destruction by male hands. Nana's body is portrayed as purchasable through her roles of performer and prostitute, and expendable when belonging to only one man, Fontan, who beats her brutally and denies her economic agency by refusing to give her money or let her keep the money she has earned through prostitution. Although Nana makes a living through the feminized jobs of performance and prostitution, and remains loyal to her partner despite his cruelty, her death is ultimately caused by fulfilling the feminine and motherly duty of breastfeeding. Thus, the eventual deterioration of Nana's body seems predetermined, as it is a female body attempting to exist within a patriarchal society that defines women's worth by the economic value of their bodies, yet only grants economic value to women who are willing to let their bodies be gradually destroyed through sexual use, domestic abuse and motherhood.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A COMMODITY

Zola's *Nana* demonstrates how the female body can exist only as an object, as women's success within their feminized occupations is produced by their bodies. The first chapter immediately demonstrates this obsession with the female body as the pillar of female success as Zola details Nana and her performance within *The Blond Venus*. The author predominantly focuses on Nana, yet other female characters within the performance such as Rose Mignon are also given attention. It is evident that the show is performed by an almost entirely female cast while the director, stage manager and theatre owner are male. Nancy Harstock elaborates on the sexual division of labor and how "there is some biological, bodily component to human existence" within capitalist, patriarchal societies (355).¹ Women's lives differ structurally from men's because of their bodies and the specific bodied duties that are recognized as valuable within patriarchal capitalist society and thus, assigned to female bodies to perform. Hartstock examines the ways in which women are institutionally and systematically influenced to be responsible for producing both goods in feminized spaces, such as the home, and human beings, and how certain tasks are epistemologically and ontologically crafted to be feminine. Feminists like Hartstock struggle to accurately define the various tasks that comprise "women's work" as the production of goods within feminized spaces range from making dinner to producing children – is sex, then an inevitable duty of a woman's life within patriarchal society? In Zola's Parisian theatre, the answer proves to be 'yes' as a hierarchy is created that emulates the work division and power structure of the home.

Despite the fact that men do exist within the space of the theatre, less emphasis is placed on their bodies and sexuality, and Zola grants dialogue only to the male arrangers and owners of the shows. Before the novel introduces us to Nana, we meet Bordenave, who insists that his theatre be called a 'brothel' repeatedly. "'Call it my brothel! Call it my brothel,' Bordenave again interpolated, with the frigid obstinacy of a man convicted" (Zola 10). In relation to Hartstock's division of labor, Bordenave's title change reflects the way in which the performance realm is primarily composed of female actors and male owners and consumers. The specific word choice of 'brothel' also reduces the women's identities to their bodies and indicates that the theatre actually functions as a space where women are expected to be sexualized by and relinquish their bodies to male audience members. According to Hartstock, this space is feminized through the social reiteration of men as consumers and women as performers and inherently finding pleasure in performing for men within the home and within 'feminized' but still, public spaces. Within the feminized yet public spaces of the theatre and prostitution, women are allowed to fulfill only the feminized role of sexual performer, while men can enter the space as owners or consumers, reinforcing a relationship of dependence and making the female body a commodity. Joan Landes zooms in on the way in which women are allowed to enter and interact with men within the public sphere within specific boundaries: "A stage career was one of the very few professions in which a woman of this era could hope to earn a living, practice a craft, and achieve some measure of social acclaim," but women were denied the privilege of actually discussing the qualities of performances (Landes 75).² The only

critics within Nana are male, and conversations regarding performances are limited to male characters such as Monsieur Léon Fauchery, who writes the review "The Golden Fly" about Nana. Nana can only function as a performer—a performer for men—for within the sexual division of labor, 'men's work' is funded exponentially better than feminized work such as acting, prostitution and motherhood and thus, men are the only ones who can afford to attend the shows at the theatre. As Hannah Thompson explains, terming the theatre a 'brothel' "moves sexuality from the privacy of the bedroom into the public [men's] domain, in which sexuality is one more commodity to be bought and sold" (Thompson 55). In this way, Nana's economic dependence on men and their financial success is predisposed since male producers were not only the creators of the shows, but the customers—supplying the demand for Nana's performances, financing the performance's success and ultimately, providing for Nana's livelihood. Nana transforms from a female being into a commodity dependent on heterosexual male desire.

Although Nana's functioning within the feminized space of the "brothel" elucidates the way in which women belonged to men financially, her sexual performance and prostitution emphasize how her body is what truly engenders her success.³ Landes notes that theatre provides women with a space to showcase their talent, but she neglects the power the male theatre owners and consumers have over women financially, compelling female actresses to appeal to the male's assumed heterosexual appetite.⁴ It is clear that Nana's body is truly what the male directors value, since they hired her explicitly for her voluptuous shape, and the predominantly male audience loudly applauds Nana, even when it is made evident that she cannot sing:

Never had a more tuneless voice been heard. She thrust her arms in front of her, while she swayed her whole body to and fro in a manner which struck the audience. There was a sound of whistling. A voice in the stalls cried out, "That's very smart!" The young gentlemen fascinated in turn by Nana's gracious contours, applauded. The men raised their opera glasses. Her voice completely failed her but rather than fret herself, she kicked up her leg, and her bosom was thrown upward and forward. Applause burst forth on both sides (21-22).

Nana's bodily movements as suggestive of a sexual longing for male touch is what renders her terrible singing performance to be not merely bearable, but enjoyable. Her sexuality is used to specifically enrapture the male audience because her sexuality is the only thing that is valued by male-owned society. The way in which Nana's existence and livelihood are contingent on the independently functioning male as either director or consumer of her body speaks to Luce Irigaray's description of the way in which women must exist within capitalist patriarchal society—in relation to the male. Her essay "The Sex Which Is Not One" articulates how the female body is prohibited from existing as its own referent and alludes to the way in which Freud describes women's sexuality as a "lack of male presence" rather than acknowledging the female body's presence.⁵ Nana's sexuality and synonymously her body—as it is the vessel of her sexuality—is seen as an object in need of men's control and pacification by man's presence. Nana's body thus exists as an economic and a sexual entity, and these representations of Nana's body are one and the same in that it is her sexuality that grants her financial stability and value.⁶ "Like Marx's money, she does not signify independently, but as an exchange value, mediating and signifying male desire."⁷ Nana's body functions as a symbol of male desire and economic privilege as men spend their money on her to own her—without men and without them valuing her body, Nana is nothing. Peter Brooks explains, "What is for sale, in Zola's view, always leads us back to the woman's body" and Nana's ability to operate only within the feminized realms of theatre and prostitution speaks to this (Brooks 150).⁸ Nana is not a being but a body that is owned by man through its functioning as a commodity within a world in which men are granted all economic power.

THE MALE GAZE AND MALE OWNERSHIP

The female body as an object and commodity within patriarchal capitalist society allows men not only to purchase female bodies but to own them. Nana, due to her reliance on men, is disallowed any sense of agency, even in regards to where she is looking. Male ownership of the female body ranges from dominance over the physical body to control over what the female body is allowed to see. Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," elucidates the way in which the dominance of the

heterosexual male's perspective within capitalist patriarchal society trickles into the art of film.⁹ The male gaze appears in Zola's *Nana* as Nana's body is described numerous times throughout the novel through the viewpoint of various male characters. In one scene in particular, Nana strips for men as they relax in her dressing room. "She had begun undressing, and was rapidly taking off her costume...a corner of her shift was even now visible. There she stood, bare-armed, bare-shouldered, bare-breasted, in all the adorable glory of her youth and plump fair beauty" (Zola 141). It is clear that the reader is granted the male gaze within this passage as the narrative details the men's focus on Nana's undressing and naked body. The male gaze thus exists textually within the novel and metafictionally, as the reader is provided with the male gaze.

The male gaze is complicated, however when Nana is given the privilege of looking. The reader is provided with a female gaze in the passage in which Nana examines her own body:

One of Nana's pleasures consisted in undressing herself in front of the mirror on her wardrobe door. She would let everything slip off her in turn, and then would stand perfectly naked and gaze and gaze in complete oblivion of all around her...Passion for her own body...absorbed in the love of herself...without her once turning to look at him. (213)

Although Zola postures Nana's gaze as an act of agency, her sight focuses on her body – the sign of male desire and ownership. The image of the body as what Nana's sight rests on demonstrates the ways in which society and its literature "repeatedly engage[s] the woman's body in struggles over the positions from which she might be allowed to look" (Matlock 513).¹⁰ Nana is allowed to look but only allowed to look at what *men* want to look at. The reader, in this way, is given yet another description of her body through a feminist-veiled male gaze.

However, the fact that Zola expresses Nana's love for her own body seems to complicate a simple interpretation of the female gaze within this scene as a feminist-veiled male gaze.¹¹ *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, includes a scene in which Emma looks in the mirror at herself and is satisfied with her bodily features, much like in *Nana*. Matlock argues that this instance of agency in female looking is what spurred the trial of *Madame Bovary*, for the male prosecutors "sought in this book a person who could rule this woman and found none there" (Matlock 514). Unlike *Madame Bovary*, Nana meets the prosecutors' demands as a male figure is present to put Nana in her place. Count Muffat is angered by Nana's narcissism and sexual agency in looking at herself. "Muffat used to grow angry then...What was coming over the man? She was doing it to please herself and not other people" (213). In this way, the reader is never actually given a sense of female looking without a male character's sight overpowering it. Count Muffat's anger with Nana overrides her loving admiration of herself as the reader is provided with Muffat's internal dialogue in addition to his looking at Nana.¹² It is Nana's pleasure in looking at herself that ultimately spurs the Count's violence towards Nana, which results in his raping her.¹³ "In a fit of brutal passion, he caught Nana to his breast and threw her down on the carpet...he longed to possess her" (216).¹⁴ The male figure seeks to own Nana in order to control her deviant behavior of looking and thwart any attempt at agency by a female body within patriarchal society. Nana's body's destruction is thus predetermined, as it completely belongs to the male, who is granted permission to obliterate any threat to the patriarchal order. Looking is agency women are not privileged enough to perform and Matlock comments on how realist novels like *Madame Bovary* and *Nana* portray women's looking as "a way men might look when they look like women (who ought not to be looking to begin with)" (216). Even when Nana looks, she focuses on her commoditized body, whose value stems from male interest and the money she has attained because of it. Muffat abuses Nana's body because she is not supposed to be looking – his abuse is justified according to patriarchal standards and so is the corrosion of Nana's body.

The deterioration of Nana's body continues within her new and exclusive relationship with the actor Fontan as he frequently and brutally abuses her. Nana becomes economically owned through attempting to thrive in patriarchal society as an actress and a prostitute, yet the relationship she has with Fontan introduces a different kind of male ownership – one in which there are no benefits for the female party, and obedience is enforced by abuse. The first instance in which Fontan abuses Nana occurs after Nana comments on another woman's looks. Fontan refutes Nana's claims of the female's ugliness and

attests to her beauty, eventually demanding Nana's silence on the matter. Nana complies yet is unable to sleep due to crumbs in the bed and Fontan finally, hits her out of rage with her complaints. He "dealt her a ringing box on the ear. The blow was so smart that Nana suddenly found herself lying again with her head on the pillow. She lay half stunned. He threatened her with a second slap..." but Fontan finally decided to sleep (244). Nana is initially hit because she did not agree with Fontan's opinion on looking at another female. In accord with Matlock's theory, Nana is again looking where she is not supposed to look and in the same respect, speaking of what she is not supposed to be speaking about – her opinions. Muffat and Fontan's acts of violence both stem from attempts at controlling Nana and suppressing the deviant, unfeminine behaviors she exhibits such as looking and assuming her sight is as valid as her male counterparts'.

Although Nana initially thought that Fontan's punch would be the first and last time he hit her, she quickly realizes that domestic violence is a new part of her relationship. Fontan's frequent abuse of Nana, "for a mere trifle – a yes, a no," reveals ties between capitalist patriarchal society and Foucault's panopticon.¹⁵ As the panopticon is the all-seeing tower that ensures its prisoners are acting according to hegemonic identity structures, capitalist patriarchal society is essentially a panopticon that thrives off wealthy patriarchs policing women's adherence to hegemonic gender-class performance (245). Nana performs feminized activities, such as sex and dancing, within feminized spaces, but her looking and speaking outside these spaces is met with the discipline mechanism, Foucault's device of using the fear of punishment to make power operate more efficiently. Through this method, Nana's fear of punishment for performing behaviors that deviate from the hegemonic behaviors ascribed to her gender and class identities influence her to police herself and act like the ideal female, which is defined by Fontan, who is representative of overall patriarchal society. Nana fears reproaching her partner for his abusive behavior because she knows she will be met with punishment, making Nana silent on the matter of her suffering (245). In order for the panopticon to be successful, Fontan must influence the peripheral subject, Nana, to not only police herself but understand her punishment as deserved and act according to the patriarch's standards, which eventually occurs within *Nana*. "She began to feel respect towards him. She loved him too dearly. Why, it was even nice to be beaten if he struck the blow! She grew accustomed to it" (245). Fontan's full power over Nana is demonstrated as she *respects* him for abusing her, reiterating the notion that the man, as the economically and sexually privileged, has a greater understanding of how a woman should act. Nana accepts Fontan's abuse because she is conditioned to believe that she must remain with Fontan, for she never attempts to leave him throughout their relationship, and society in turn demonstrates how that belief is true. As a female-bodied person, Nana's options are limited to remaining with Fontan, who has control over all her finances, and facing horrid abuse or death for attempting to leave him. Both possible fates ensure Nana's abuse and risking her life.

Fontan, capitalist patriarchal society, and the panopticon all have the same objective – to rule over the powerless subjects and make them obediently adhere to their hegemonic identities. Zola's choice of abuse as Fontan's disciplinary mechanism speaks to the truth that granting men a vast amount of power, like within the panopticon, guarantees the subjugation of women and the deterioration of their bodies, for such a power grants license to discipline and abuse the less powerful within the panopticon's peripheral prison ring.¹⁶

DEATH BY THE FEMALE BODY

The novel comes into full circle as Nana's death is caused by completing a feminine act – breastfeeding her baby – and her body is completely mutilated by the smallpox transmitted to her from her child. Nana's body's disfigurements are described in their full ghastliness:

A heap of matter and blood, a shovelful of corrupted flesh... The pustules had invaded the whole of the face, they already resembled some decaying damp from the grave. One eye, the left eye, had completely foundered among bubbling purulence, and the other, which remained half open, looked like a deep, black, ruinous hole. The nose was still suppurating. Quite a reddish crust was peeling from one of the cheeks and invading the mouth, which it distorted into a horrible grin. Venus was rotting (467-67)

Nana's deterioration at this point in the novel is severe, as her body is reduced to a pile of flesh. Even after Nana is raped by Count Muffat and abused by Fontan, the damage to her body is never as detailed or as grotesque as the final sight of her body upon her deathbed. Yet Nana's body is always gradually declining as a result of the incessant exploitation of women, even within feminized spaces and when completing hegemonic, feminized tasks, such as breastfeeding. Motherhood is not only considered "women's work" in Hartstock's sexual division of labor and thus, deemed an acceptable profession for Nana to fulfill, but it is also regarded as women's economic duty as children are valued as new sources of free labor in capitalist society.¹⁷ In this way, Nana is expected to have a child as a functioning female body much like she is expected to flaunt her sexuality for the male gaze and remain with an abusive partner – it is her ultimate duty to serve the male-dominated society and her body bears the brunt of this obligation. As pregnancy and birth transform a woman's physique, fulfilling the economic and gender requirement of motherhood inevitably requires bodily deterioration. It is her performance of motherhood and her effort to nurture her son by breastfeeding him that not only ends Nana's life but horrifically mutilates her body. Before she dies, she is stripped of the only resource patriarchal society valued – her body. Nana's body ultimately deteriorates due to her constant attempts at surviving within patriarchal capitalist Paris as an actress, prostitute, loyal partner and mother – for each occupation renders her body as belonging and subordinate to the male. Nana must exist within a reality in which her body's destruction is predetermined, as patriarchy and capitalism work together in valuing women's bodies, such as in prostitution, partnership and motherhood, at the expense of their deterioration. Nana's death is a testament to the truth that Nana would not have been able to survive without her body within the patriarchal capitalist structure but what inevitably kills her and disfigures her body is the structure itself and the way in which it values females' bodies and their deterioration.

CONCLUSION

Nana's death perfectly depicts the way in which instances of the commodification and abuse of her body contribute to her overall death by patriarchal society. Valerie Minogue finds fault for Nana's death in the historical and situational context of nineteenth century Paris: "the age she lives in, an age that has offered her nothing but the possibility of exploiting the only resources she has, her body and her sexuality" (133). It is her body that grants her access to the world of the wealthy nobility and it is within this world that she is met with the abuse of the same resource that once allowed her such a privilege. Nana, like Flaubert's Emma, is trapped by a desire for a life beyond the confines of male dependency, and the pursuit of this desire kills Emma in *Madame Bovary* as it does Nana in *Nana*.¹⁸ The female body functioning within a capitalist patriarchal society is predetermined to deteriorate as the body is the only resource that is valued and it is only valued through its fulfilling roles that reinforce male dominance and are established in exploitative abuse.

ENDNOTES AND WORKS CITED

¹ For a discussion of the sexual division of labor as natural and spontaneous, see Frederick Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property*. See Sarah Ruddick's work in "Maternal Thinking." Ruddick argues against Hartstock by stating that both bodies and socially ascribed duties to certain bodies are invariant and nearly unchangeable features of human life.

² See pages 75-81 for Rousseau's reaction to women entering the public sphere as actresses and how their sexualized performances corrupt all men, rendering women to be inherently evil.

³ See Hannah Thompson's chapter "Questions of sexuality and gender" for a discussion of the sexual implications of calling the theatre a "brothel."

⁴ Refer to Freud's "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

⁵ See Freud's essays "Female Sexuality" and "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes" for a more detailed discussion on female sexuality.

⁶ Refer to Marx's *Capital* for a discussion regarding the sexual division of labor as economically natural.

⁷ For a discussion of the referent and the signified within realist literature, see Barthes essay, "The Reality Effect." Claire Goldstein clarifies the way in which women's bodies are commodified and thus, always

rely on men. Irigary's ultimate goal is for the woman to be self-referential and her work "The Sex which is Not One" discusses the three specific ways women can function in society.

⁸ For a discussion on the way in which the woman is defined and fetishized by the market economy see Steven Wilson's "Nana, Prostitution and the Textual Foundations of Zola's *Au Bonheur Des Dames*."

⁹ See Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure" for greater discussion on the obsession of looking at the human form and its connections to Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*.

¹⁰ See Jann Matlock's essay "Censoring the Realist Gaze" for a greater discussion of censorship as a result of women's looking.

¹¹ Refer to the "Virtual Speculum in the New World Order" for Donna Haraway's theorization that looking separates the female subject and the female body.

¹² For a discussion concerning discourses and discursal hierarchy, see Catherine Belsey's "Hierarchy of Discourses."

¹³ Valerie Minogue refers to the rape scene as Count Muffat "brutally" making love to Nana in "Nana: the world, the flesh and the devil" (133).

¹⁴ Peter Brooks in his essay, "Storied Bodies or Nana at last Unveil'd" argues that Count Muffat fails in his attempt to possess Nana (22-24).

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* for a discussion of panopticism.

¹⁶ Jana Sawicki relates the dominatory facets of man over the female body as an analysis of disciplinary power in her book *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*.

¹⁷ See Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* for a full description of the necessary duties ascribed to certain genders under capitalism.

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