Boundaries and the Working Woman in Zola’s L’Assommoir, Nana and Au Bonheur des dames

by

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(Under the Direction of Nina Hellerstein)

Abstract

For the working woman in nineteenth-century Paris, it is essential to establish clear boundaries between the self and others as well as between work space and home. In order to avoid repeating conflicts witnessed during childhood, she must develop a personal identity separate from previous generations of her family. It is also necessary to create a division of space between the work place and the home. Failure to create boundaries leaves the woman vulnerable to criticism of the Other, the collective, hostile observer, as well as corrupt men, who seek to exploit the woman’s emotional vulnerability.

Index Words: Zola, Boundaries, Space, Working Woman, Employment, Demi-monde, Prostitution, Department Store
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INTRODUCTION

The theme of boundaries, physical and otherwise, is a prominent one in Zola’s literature, particularly in regard to the working woman. Employed women, in Zola’s works, are at a disadvantage because of societal structures that make it difficult to create clear boundaries between work and home life, between self and others, and between the family and the larger society.

Despite the difficulty of creating and maintaining such boundaries, the success of the working woman in Zola’s literature hinges on her ability to do so. Although some research has been done on the issue of space in Zola’s works, there have been few if any studies relating specifically to boundaries and the working woman.

Study of the working woman is of literary importance because it provides a more clear understanding of Parisian life in Zola’s time. Opportunities for employment were limited, and necessity forced women into difficult circumstances. These harsh circumstances provide the setting for many of the conflicts presented by Zola. These conflicts are often the result of a collision between an individual harboring a latent inherited character flaw and brutal environmental conditions that bring this flaw to the surface.
One of the primary themes in Zola’s literature is that of generational and hereditary issues. The ability to break with a painful and impoverished past and look toward a brighter future is crucial. However, it is so difficult that only one of the women being studied manages to do so. Zola generally portrays women as weak and unable to control their appetites, contaminating future generations with their lack of self-control:

Pour les lecteurs des Rougon-Macquart, l’infirmité qui hante Gervaise est symbolique de l’obsession dont Zola ne parvient pas à se libérer, c’est-à-dire l’idée que la femme/mère, par sa faiblesse naturelle, est toujours coupable des maux qui s’abattent sur une famille, et qu’elle doit être punie. (Hansen 49)

Gervaise in the novel l’Assommoir is a woman who illustrates both the positive and the negative aspects of the boundary issue, since for a time she is able to maintain appropriate boundaries and achieve a fleeting and precarious success.

Gervaise’s downfall, which occurs gradually over a period of twenty years, is primarily caused by her willingness to allow others to make decisions for her, and also to allow the vices of others to contaminate her own
life. As a laundress, the stench of humanity is the medium with which Gervaise works. She washes the linens and the undergarments of everyone in the community. According to Zola, "... on déshabillait ainsi tout le quartier de la Goutte-d’Or" (176).

This creates an environment in which privacy does not exist; the intimacies of the entire community come together in the same vat of dirty laundry stirred by Gervaise: "Et il semblait que ses premières paresses vinssent de là, de l’asphyxie des vieux linges empoisonnant l’air autour d’elle" (174).

The novel Nana portrays the life of Gervaise’s daughter who becomes a part of the demi-monde, the luxurious, immoral world of high-class prostitution. The very word “demi-monde” suggests a class of women with no defined status in society. They socialize with the nobility and the bourgeois, but many come from poverty-stricken backgrounds, where they also feel perfectly at ease.

Zola, in fact, identifies prostitutes as a part of the “fourth” world, the first being soldiers and workers, the second, merchants, the third, bourgeois and the high society, and the fourth being a “world apart,” comprised of priests, artists, prostitutes and murderers:
What is the invariant of this motley group? A common function, I would venture: both the prostitute and the artist (as well, of course, as the murderer and the priest) insure communication between the topologically separate classes. By virtue of their extraterritorial status, they enjoy a unique freedom to circulate in society.

(Schor 130)

Nana makes destructive use of this freedom of circulation. Unlike Gervaise, who remains within her own social class, Nana is the emissary of her people, the oppressed poor. Although Nana is not responsible for bringing immorality to the nobility, she does bring out latent vices and exploit them to her own advantage. Although Nana is able to take advantage of her freedom of movement in order to exact vengeance on those who are born into privilege, she is also a victim of the circumstances imposed on her by her profession.

Prostitution, unlike any other profession, creates almost insurmountable difficulties for the woman who seeks to create personal boundaries. Intimacies that are normally reserved for marital or romantic relationships are sold for profit, and the prostitute, if she wishes to have
a romantic relationship or children, must find a way to separate the issues of love and profit:

The sexual act more than any other can be seen as destroying women’s “separateness,” their integrity and identity. In the case of the prostitute, the issue is acute: recourse to sex with prostitutes is for men often an exploitative off-loading of unresolved personal conflicts and problems, so that the woman becomes a fantasy figure which denies her human reality. (Chitnis 23)

A striking contrast to Nana can be found in the character of Denise, in Au Bonheur des dames. Denise is faced with the challenges associated with her line of work as a department store clerk.

Women working in department stores had a unique position in society. They received higher pay than those in the “ouvrier” class, and were expected to speak and dress in a manner similar to their bourgeois clientele, at least during working hours. However, they did not have the means to enjoy all of the benefits of the bourgeois and remained an undefined and intermediate class of workers: Women clerks were not quite full-fledged bourgeoises, but they were not quite working
class either, and, if the nature of their work placed them close to the latter, the nature of their life style approximated the former. They were part of a new breed, a new middle-class stratum with entertainments and circles in many ways their own, yet never too far removed from the bourgeoisie above them. (Miller 196)

Denise has particular difficulty creating adequate space between her work and her personal life. She is required to live in the department store where she works. However, to the extent that she is able to create a private space for herself, she does. She also creates boundaries between herself and her co-workers. She does not retaliate against those who try to destroy her, nor does she allow herself to be influenced by the vices she perceives among her friends:

Elle n’était point révoltée, il lui semblait bien permis d’arranger l’existence comme on l’entendait, lorsqu’on se trouvait seule et libre sur la terre. Jamais elle n’avait obéi à des idées, sa raison droite et sa nature saine la maintenaient simplement dans l’honnêteté où elle vivait. (Au Bonheur des Dames 171)
Unlike Gervaise and Nana, Denise is consistently able to create boundaries between the workplace and her private life. By examining how her coping strategies differ from those of other characters, we will illustrate the necessity of creating boundaries as well as the consequences of failure to do so. Our study will explore how the problem of boundaries provides a structural and thematic basis for analyzing the different destinies of three of Zola’s working women characters.
Chapter 1

Generational and Hereditary Boundaries

One of the defining aspects of the industrial era was the emergence of boundaries, or divisions of space and time, as well as division of roles between the sexes. The division between public and private spaces became an important concept for the smooth functioning of society. Creation of these boundaries was a mark of respectability among the bourgeois, but for the working classes, particularly women, this was extremely difficult.

Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition defines a boundary as something such as a line, point, or plane that indicates or fixes a limit or extent. This definition has a variety of different dimensions in relation to 19th century society. For example the bourgeois feared a lack of social boundaries which would allow for social mobility of the working class and ultimately contaminate the bourgeois. Prostitutes, who moved more freely among the different classes of society, were regarded as a serious threat. According to Johnson, “This class of women was generally seen as disorderly and a threat to the bourgeois norms of domesticity” (Johnson 5).
This social dimension of the concept of boundaries plays an important role in the three novels we are studying. In Nana, in particular, the problem of class boundaries and the dangers caused by social unrest and injustice is a central theme. It is directly illustrated by Nana herself, who was regarded as such a threat that a newspaper article was published about her, comparing her to a golden fly, contaminating the aristocracy:

... l’histoire d’une fille, née de quatre ou cinq générations d’ivrognes, le sang gâté par une longue hérédité de misère et de boisson, qui se transformait chez elle en un détraquement nerveux de son sexe de femme. Avec elle, la pourriture qu’on laissait fermenter dans le peuple, remontait et pourrissait l’aristocratie. Elle devenait une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction sans le vouloir elle-même, corrompant et désorganisant Paris entre ses cuisses de neige. (Nana 225)

Although her bourgeois clientele would prefer to forget about Nana’s humble origins, she and Satin revel in the discomfort they create by speaking of their upbringing during formal dinner engagements. The men with whom they
associate are reminded not only of the type of women they have brought into their beds, but also of their own family histories:

Elles avaient un brusque besoin de remuer cette boue de leur jeunesse; et c’était toujours quand il y avait là des hommes, comme si elles cédaient à une rage de leur imposer le fumier où elles avaient grandi. Ces messieurs pâlissaient, avec des regards gênés. (Nana 335)

The petit bourgeois took great pains to create the appearance of decency and perpetual prosperity. If one’s ancestors had no accomplishments or status to speak of, it was best not to mention them at all. Breaking the generational cycle of poverty required creating a boundary between the past and the present. It was necessary to distance oneself from the failures and hardships endured by one’s parents:

The genetic patrimony of the elite was menaced by unseen influences emanating from the streets, the factories, and the garrets. The fear of being infected by teeming urban masses metamorphosed into a fear of degeneration. (Guerrand 619)

For many of these nouveaux riches the working class, from which they had only recently emerged, remains an
object of scorn. Ridiculing the poor and marginalizing them is one way of creating a boundary and thus providing a measure of safety and stability for themselves. By suggesting that the poor were genetically inferior, and thus deserving of their plight, the middle class was able to justify its position in society while explaining away social problems such as domestic violence and alcoholism which afflicted the working classes in greater numbers.

Alcoholism is a sort of generational curse that the oppressed working class has little resources to fight. Even for the poorest of the poor, alcohol is inexpensive and readily available. The location of the Assommoir, on the Rue de la Goutte d’Or, in the midst of the poverty and misery of the working class, is almost too convenient. Keeping the poverty-stricken members of society vulnerable to this weakness serves the interests of those who wish to maintain a firm boundary between the poor and the bourgeois. For the poorest of the working class, alcohol provides the only available means of escape:

   C’est d’abord l’alcool, l’eau-de-vie, l’eau qui donne la vie, ce qui ‘graisse la machine’ . . . .
   L’alcool, surtout, reveille la brute qui, pense Zola, sommeille au fond de tout homme, le rend fou, le pousse au meurtre. (Becker 45)
Gervaise’s tendency to overindulge in food illustrates another form of escapism. This seems to be a reaction to her desire to escape from the incessant poverty and hunger that has plagued previous generations of her family:

The action of many of the Rougon-Macquart novels is largely shaped by the fulfillment or frustration of these appetites. Savage appetites and the violent tonality of Zola’s world correspond to pervasive images of animality.

(Nelson 12)

The issue of boundaries is also relevant to the problem of gender roles. Working class women had particular difficulties conforming to societal standards of ladylike behavior. Necessity forced working class women to behave in a more androgynous manner than their bourgeois counterparts. Although this possibly allowed for a greater freedom to move about in public, it also left them open to criticism.

Particularly in L’Assommoir, we see working class women behaving like working class men. Gervaise and Virginie are depicted publicly brawling over Lantier, while the women in Gervaise’s laundry shop call out suggestively to Goujet, who is offended by their “saletés de la bouche” (136). Ironically, as the women take on more masculine
characteristics, the men around them become more passive and dependent.

Johnson describes the social dimension of the spaces in which working class women were forced to exist:

The female responses to and place in society map out her psyche, reveal her psychology, and identify her with labels such as aristocratic, bourgeois, proletarian, or prostitute. Proletarian women were often associated with spaces that were sites of abuse, commodification, intense labor, and commercial exchange. This class of women could be seen, battered, desired, or socially condemned in their homes, outdoors in nature or in public streets, or at their work sites. (Johnson 4-5)

Working class women were often forced to compromise their health and safety by working in unsafe environments outside the home. Living conditions in working class communities forced the poor to live in close contact with their neighbors. With several generations often living in the same cramped quarters, escaping the cycle of poverty and desperation became very difficult.

The most complex kind of boundaries are those that an individual creates between him or her self and other
individuals. This involves a process of individuation, which requires a level of self awareness that many working class women failed to attain.

Carl Jung describes this individuation process as an integration of all aspects, both positive and negative, of an individual’s personality, in an attempt to actualize the unique potential of one’s individual psyche (Jung 51). An individual who fails to complete this process may find him or her self acting solely according to the machinations of others or compulsively acting out self-destructive behavior patterns observed during childhood.

It is through her relationships, familial and otherwise that the working class woman often encounters the greatest obstacles to her success. Failure to create boundaries between the self and others can doom a woman to repeat the cycle of misfortune that has plagued previous generations of her family. One of Zola’s goals in creating the Rougon-Macquart series is to illustrate the constraints of heredity on the individual by tracing the fortune of one family under the Second Empire:

Zola’s characters are defined and circumscribed by appetites and instincts which are reinforced by certain atavistic or hereditary predispositions. (Nelson 12)
Clearly, Zola does not see heredity alone as sufficient to bring about the destruction of an individual. According to Roger Clark the Rougon-Macquart novels were designed to illustrate the "determining effects" of three forces, only one of which is heredity:

The Rougon-Macquart novels were designed to stand as illustrations of the rigidly determining effects of three forces: of race (the character's heredity, his genetic and physiological backgrounds, rather than his ethnicity), of milieu (the social and physical environments that the character inhabits) and of moment (the specific historical circumstances that provide the background to the character’s life).

(Clark 20)

Zola presents the idea that a character with an undesirable family history, placed in a harsh environment, will often revert to the dysfunctional and self-destructive behaviors he or she was exposed to during his or her formative years.

One character who illustrates this phenomenon is Gervaise. Her father was an alcoholic who beat his wife and children. Gervaise is left with a permanent limp as a result of her father’s beatings. Although such an injury
could not be called hereditary from a genetic standpoint, it is a legacy left to Gervaise by her father. Although she was able to walk away from the abusive environment created by her father, she walked with a limp, a permanent reminder of her past. The limp slows her down both literally and symbolically as she attempts to escape her abusive background.

When Lantier, Gervaise's common-law husband, abandons her, it initially leaves her and her children in dire straits. However, this actually helps her to break away from her family of origin. Lantier serves as an intermediary between her parents and her new life in Paris. Although Lantier assists her in escaping from her parents in Plassans, his presence is like the limp that constantly reminds her of her origins.

In addition to the limp she receives from her father, Gervaise also carries a weakness inherited from her mother. This weakness takes the form of a willingness to submit to the will of an abusive man, even to her own destruction. Zola seems to suggest that women are in the most danger when they become vulnerable through their emotions as women. It becomes apparent that when Gervaise is emotionally involved with a man she has no will of her own:
Elle, d’ailleurs, ressemblait à sa mère, une grosse travailleuse, morte à la peine, qui avait servi de bête de somme au père Macquart pendant plus de vingt ans. (L’Assommoir 58)

It is not until Lantier is out of the picture that Gervaise begins to prosper. She marries and begins to set down roots in Paris. She begins to look toward a future that has nothing to do with her family of origin. However, the success Gervaise experiences is tenuous at best. She goes into considerable debt to open her laundry shop, and following his fall from a roof, her husband proves to be more of a liability than an asset. It seems as if the slightest misfortune could bring her family to ruin.

It is precisely at this moment that Lantier makes his return, and the boundary between past and present disappears. As Gervaise’s first lover, Lantier has left a powerful imprint upon her, similar to the limp given to her by her father:

En plus de son hérité familiale, Gervaise a hérité d’un trait commun à toutes les femmes, si on en croit Zola, son corps garde éternellement l’empreinte du premier amant. C’est une faiblesse insurmontable puisqu’elle est inhérente à la nature féminine. (Hansen 46)
Gervaise ultimately ends up in a polyandrous relationship, serving as wife to both Coupeau and Lantier. Although infidelity is certainly not unique to the working class, poverty prevents her from creating separate spaces for her work, her marital and extra-marital relationships. Circumstances force Gervaise to live and work in full view of the entire community.

The laundry shop is a public place, where people come and go without invitation. Yet it is also where Gervaise lives. Without the benefit of a private living space, even the slightest domestic disorder leaves Gervaise in a vulnerable position within the community. When she commits the error of succumbing to Lantier’s advances, she is unable to keep the matter a secret for very long.

Goujet, the one person who could save Gervaise from her self-destructive tendencies, understands that she allows her family to corrupt her good nature. He pleads with her to run away with him and make a fresh start. He insists on going far away, even to a different country, and on bringing no one along, not even Gervaise’s children. Goujet succeeds in separating himself from his father’s alcoholism and violence. He sees the effect that Gervaise’s family has on her, and seems to feel that
Gervaise can only be true to herself if she is separated from all outside influence:

"--Enfin, voilà, nous ne serions que tous les deux, reprit-il. Les autres me gêner, vous comprenez?... Quand j'ai de l'amitié pour une personne, je ne peux pas voir cette personne avec d'autres. (L'Assommoir 305)

Although it is unknown whether this strategy would have helped Gervaise, it is clear that her family is contributing to her downfall. She has been unable to follow her own intuition, expressed shortly before her marriage to Coupeau, that her life seems potentially out of her own control:

Son rêve était de vivre dans une société honnête, parce que la mauvaise société, disait-elle, c'était comme un coup d'assommoir, ça vous cassait le crâne, ça vous aplâtissait une femme en moins de rien. Elle se sentait prise d'une sueur devant l'avenir et se comparait à un sou lancé en l'air, retombant pile ou face, selon les hasards du pavé. Tout ce qu'elle avait déjà vu, les mauvais exemples étalés sous ses yeux d'enfant, lui donnaient une fière leçon.

(L'Assommoir 68)
Gevaise’s children have not escaped the family turmoil, and therefore face a very uncertain future. Her sons, who probably retain a few memories of their mother at a time in her life when she was respectable, leave when home life becomes unbearable. It is as if Gervaise discards her sons in order to make room in her life for Coupeau and Lantier.

However, Nana’s relationship with her mother is different. Nana is the only one of Gervaise’s children born within wedlock. She is spoiled by her father, and receives much more attention than her brothers. However, Gervaise’s interest in Nana can hardly be considered maternal affection. It is an unhealthy attachment, which ultimately hinders Nana’s efforts to separate from her family of origin. Nana’s earliest memories are of her mother’s infidelity. She is raised in an environment of unstable relationships and few boundaries.

Although Nana shows little loyalty to her father, this is no indication that she has broken her ties with him and thus escaped the generational turmoil that afflicts her family. She befriends Lantier, who ironically shows little interest in his own sons. She even asks to sleep with him, showing a precocious desire to usurp her mother’s position.
When she is not sleeping in Lantier’s bed, she sleeps in the same room as Grandmother Coupeau, who lingers for a long time between life and death. The veil between life and death, between future and past generations is very thin. Nana’s reaction to her grandmother’s death reveals the extent to which she has been contaminated by the environment in which she has been raised:

La petite comprit, allongea le menton pour mieux voir sa grand-mère, avec sa curiosité de gamine vicieuse; elle ne disait rien, elle était un peu tremblante, étonnée et satisfaite en face de cette mort qu’elle se promettait depuis deux jours, comme une vilaine chose, cachée et défendue aux enfants. (L’Assommoir 350)

In these close quarters, Nana watches the family matriarch pit one family member against another, maliciously attempting to destroy Gervaise. She learns how people can be used and manipulated. She carries these childhood lessons with her when she leaves home and makes her way into demi-monde society. She has learned from her mother to go casually from one man’s bed to another. She has learned from her grandmother that bitterness and spite can be powerful weapons. And from her father figures she
has learned that men are lazy and abusive, unworthy of a woman’s fidelity.

Nevertheless, Nana is genuinely surprised to learn that the bourgeois and the nobility often conceal the same weaknesses and vices as the working class. Nana, who has known unfaithful women (including her mother) in the lower classes, is surprised to learn that this happens among the nobility:

La culbute des gens chics dans la crapule du vice surprenait encore Nana, qui gardait des préjugés, . . . . Alors, comme elle le disait, lorsqu’elle causait gravement, il n’y avait donc plus de vertu? Du haut en bas, on se roulait.

(Nana 275)

The question of heredity and generational transmission of problems is particularly relevant when we examine each woman’s experiences with motherhood. A mother must separate herself from the negative experiences of her own childhood in order to successfully nurture her children. It is also necessary for a mother to separate herself from the destinies of her children, regardless of what they may be.

Nana treats her own child with indifference, punctuated with infrequent bouts of fawning affection. She
ultimately seems to share her child’s destiny, succumbing to his illness only a few days after his own death. The death of Nana’s son is the culmination of a sickly and troubled family history handed down to him by his mother and anonymous father:

Nana is in this sense about sex, but it is a destructive, sterile, narcissistic, even onanistic sort of sex. But if there is much sex, there are surprisingly few babies: ‘le cul’ in Nana may be ‘le grand déstructeur’ but it is emphatically not the ‘le grand générateur’. For Zola, this paucity of children and of the energy they embody is a further symptom of the spiritual sterility and moral decline of an etiolated society on the brink of collapse. (Clark 54)

Gervaise fails to separate herself from Nana’s fate as well. She expresses jealousy that Nana’s youth and beauty allow her to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle without really working: "J’ai eu des nouvelles, murmura-t-elle enfin. On a vu ta fille . . . Oui, ta fille est très chic et n’a plus besoin de toi. Elle est joliment heureuse, celle-là, par exemple!...Ah! Dieu de Dieu! je donnerais gros pour être à sa place" (L’Assommoir 460).
Nana, who physically abandons her family of origin, continues to be influenced by her family history, and this eventually leads to her downfall. Nana’s running away from home clearly does not save her from the destructive family cycle she is exposed to during childhood. It is as if the emotional deprivation she suffers during childhood creates a longing for affection that she is never able to fulfill.

The romantic relationships with Fontan, an actor from the theatre and Georges Hugon, a young man who becomes infatuated with her, are far from healthy. She develops an insatiable appetite for money as she seeks to fill the void created during her childhood. Creating a boundary between one’s self and one’s family is something that has to occur within the individual as well as externally. A physical separation from unhealthy family relationships is not enough to bring about the changes necessary for success.

Unlike Gervaise and Nana, Denise from *Au Bonheur des dames* does manage to improve her position in society, but only by tearing herself away from her family of origin and the poverty that characterized its existence. The process of creating a distinction between herself and her parents is made easier for Denise by the fact that she is an orphan.
She also distances herself from her family roots by moving to Paris, an environment in which she has no history. Her only relative in Paris, an uncle she does not know, offers her no assistance. Denise’s only option is to let go of her past. She invests all of her emotion and energy into creating a successful career and serving as a surrogate mother to her two younger brothers.

By taking on the roles of both mother and father, nurturer and provider Denise maintains a tie with her deceased parents. Although her initial inclination is to flee to her uncle and re-connect with her blood relatives, she soon becomes aware that her uncle’s way of life is slowly dying. The old ways of doing business are coming to an end as Paris begins to modernize. Denise realizes this long before her uncle does.

Her instinct for survival motivates her to look toward the future. Denise feels an extreme malaise when she enters her uncle’s store, almost as if she were entering into a sepulcher. Meanwhile, she sees the lively bustle of commerce across the street at the Bonheur des Dames, and longs to be a part of it:

Ce magasin, si vaste pour elle, où elle voyait entrer en une heure plus de monde qu’il n’en venait chez Cornaille en six mois, l’étourdissait
et l’attirait; et il y avait, dans son désir d’y pénétrer, une peur vague qui achevait de la séduire. En même temps, la boutique de son oncle lui causait un sentiment de malaise. C’était un dédain irraisonné, une répugnance instinctive pour ce trou glacial de l’ancien commerce.

(Bonheur 44)

Creating a boundary between oneself and one’s ancestors does not always require completely abandoning the family of origin. Denise eventually reconciles with her uncle, but only after she has established a separate identity of her own. Although she is saddened by the problems afflicting her uncle and his family, she does not allow their misfortune to become her own.

Sa peur d’être une âme mauvaise, d’avoir travaillé au meurtre de ses proches, se fondait à présent dans une pitié navrée, en face de ces maux irremédiables, qui sont l’enfantement douloureux de chaque génération. Elle finit par chercher les soulagements possibles, sa bonté rêva longtemps aux moyens à prendre pour sauver au moins les siens de l’écrasement final.

(Bonheur 434)
Denise ultimately finds a lasting success because she refuses to become involved with any man until she has found a separate identity for herself. She provides an example of successful completion of Jung’s individuation process. By recognizing the plight of her uncle and his family, she demonstrates an awareness of the fate to which her heredity has predisposed her. By admitting to herself that she is tempted to succumb to Mouret’s advances, she finds the strength to resist and to protect herself from harm. Despite the harsh circumstances of her life, she remains committed to her task, and refuses to indulge in escapist tactics.

This desire for escapism contributes to the problems experienced by Gervaise and Nana, and hinders their ability to resolve them. Gervaise and Nana both use men as a means of escape from a dysfunctional home life, and each achieves a fleeting success:

Despite all these negative predispositions, Gervaise and Nana struggle to succeed against tremendous odds. In fact, they are both able, at least temporarily, to achieve positions of emotional and material success, in spite of their socio-genetic programming for failure. Furthermore, their successes on all levels are
ruined by men, and not just one man, but two in
the case of Gervaise and several in the case of
Nana. (Slott 96)

This failure comes about because neither woman is able
to establish a boundary between herself and the fate to
which her heredity has predisposed her. Ultimately the
downfall of Gervaise and Nana occurs in part because each
woman allows other individuals to contaminate the nest they
attempt to establish for themselves, both physically and
symbolically. Denise’s success can be attributed to her
refusal to allow this to happen. This creation of
boundaries is something that must occur within the
individual. Although differentiation of space and privacy
are important to this process of creating boundaries,
external separation is useless unless it mirrors what is
occurring within the individual.

However, external boundaries do play an important role
in this process. These types of boundaries will be
discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

Spatial Boundaries—Workspace vs. Private Space

Creating a private space in which to retreat from work-related stress is a challenge for many of Zola’s female characters. In nineteenth-century French working-class society, work hours were extremely long and family life consisted of the moments that could be stolen during the midst of a hectic workday:

The working classes were defined primarily in terms of work; their private lives were subject to the constraints of that work. Some workers lacked even homes of their own; they lived, ate, and slept at the places where they worked. (Prost 22)

The most successful workers are those who take control of the space in which they live; those who designate each space with its appropriate use:

Le maître est maître de l’espace. Le roi, le tyran, le dominateur, la classe au pouvoir ont compris qu’ils peuvent bien céder les forces, voire la production des forces à la condition
This is a particular problem for Denise in *Au Bonheur des dames*. The department store where she is employed requires young female employees not living with their parents to reside in the attic rooms above the store. Employees living in these rooms are subject to extreme scrutiny even after hours. The girls are subject to a curfew, and they are not allowed to visit one another’s rooms. These shabby and uncomfortable accommodations bear little resemblance to home: “Elles ne vivaient pas là, elles y logeaient la nuit, n’y rentrant le soir qu’à la dernière minute” (Bonheur 165).

Unlike her co-workers Denise spends most of her non-working hours in her room. Although her shabby little room can hardly be called a home, Denise does what little she can to make it a pleasant retreat from the hardships she experiences at work. It also serves as a sort of refuge from the dangers she perceives outside the walls of the store:

Que pouvait-elle faire sur les trottoirs, sans un sou, avec sa sauvagerie, et toujours inquiétée par la grande ville, où elle ne connaissait que les rues voisines du magasin? Après s’être
risquée jusqu’au Palais-Royal, pour prendre l’air, elle rentrait vite, s’enfermait, se mettait à coudre ou à savonner. (Bonheur 165)

When Denise is eventually able to work her way up to a more influential position in the company, she uses her influence to bring about policy changes to make living conditions more comfortable for her colleagues. The dormitories are redesigned for greater comfort, the quality of food improves; a game room, a piano and a library are added.

Although conditions improve for these workers, they are still not considered the equals of the upper classes. There is a great deal of paternalism in these gestures. Although these improvements allow employees to be more comfortable and to pursue personal interests outside working hours, it must not be forgotten that the employer is still manipulating the personal time of his workers.

This aspect of paternalism is not merely an invention of Zola’s. It reflects the true working conditions in the nineteenth-century department store:

If employees ate their meals at the store, then they were not likely to extend their breaks beyond the time allotted. If employees spent their evenings in the store rather than in the
cabarets and music halls, then they were also not likely to stay out late at night or to arrive late for work the following morning. And if employees accepted Bon Marché authority over their private lives, then they were equally not likely to question that authority when it was exercised during working hours at the House.

(Miller 109)

Denise’s solutions do provide a genuine improvement in the quality of life of the workers. One of Denise’s interventions leads to a policy change that may even save the lives of many female employees and their children. Female employees, even married ones, are routinely dismissed as soon as a pregnancy is discovered. Due to financial necessity, many women attempt to hide a pregnancy for as long as possible, often subjecting themselves and their infants to serious risks.

However, at Denise’s suggestion, a mid-wife is hired to care for women “dès que sa presence au comptoir blesserait les bonnes moeurs” (Bonheur 415). Mothers are allowed to return to work after the births of their children. The infirmary drastically improves the lot of working women.
Nevertheless, the fact that it is paid for by the employer and located on the premises of the department store is a reminder of how the employer insinuates itself into the private lives of its employees. Married couples have little private time together since visits are subject to rules set by the employer. Workplace and home become disturbingly intermingled:

The sense of hierarchy, patriarchy and family will have particularly affected women employees, reproducing within the workplace the subordination many experienced in the private sphere. (Cossick 22)

Gervaise, who for a time owns her own laundry shop, does not deal with the issue of paternalism from a corporate employer. Even so, attempting to establish a boundary between workspace and home is no less of a challenge.

When Gervaise is working as a laundress in a shop owned by Madame Fauchery, she is able to combine her income with that of her husband, and set up a cozy home, completely separate from her workplace. Although another family lives on the other side of the house, the Coupeau family finds a measure of privacy here.
Nevertheless, Gervaise longs to own a laundry shop of her own. The debt she takes on to make this dream a reality makes it necessary for her family to move into rooms behind the laundry shop. Workplace and home are now located in the same building. Gervaise’s private life is now on public display, subject to the scrutiny of her employees and the gossip of her neighbors.

It is characteristic for Gervaise to open herself up to the influence of others, often to her own harm. She opens the doors of her shop wide, inviting the poor to come in from the street and warm themselves:

In reaching out in this way, she builds a bridge between herself and her environment; she improves the area for others, but, characteristically, runs the risk of harm to herself through her generosity. (Furst 73)

It is her husband Coupeau who poses the greatest threat to her success. His failure to return to work after falling from a roof coupled with his progressive alcoholism are visible to everyone in the community. Gervaise’s attempts to confer an aura of respectability on her establishment are undermined.

Coupeau’s tendency to wander in and out of the shop while intoxicated is a prime example of this. Even when he
remains in the back room, his snoring can be heard in the shop. The first time Gervaise gives in to Coupeau’s inappropriate behavior and allows him to kiss her in her shop is so significant that Zola treats the incident as prophecy:

le gros baiser qu’ils échangèrent à pleine bouche, au milieu des saletés du métier, était comme une première chute, dans le lent avachissement de leur vie. (L’Assommoir 174)

Lantier makes his return at the precise moment when Gervaise’s life is the most visible to the public eye. In the middle of a feast to which many neighbors and employees have been invited, and most of the community is watching through the shop window, Lantier enters, at the invitation of Gervaise’s husband. Gervaise’s initial reaction upon learning that Lantier was in the area was to hope he would go away. However, once he is seated at the table, she seems to accept the situation out of pure lassitude:

Ça ne lui semblait pas possible; les murs allaient tomber et écraser tout le monde. Puis, en voyant les deux hommes assis, sans que même les rideaux de mousseline eussent bougé, elle avait subitement trouvé ces choses naturelles. Une paresse heureuse l’engourdisait, la tenait
Lantier sits down to enjoy the feast, and soon after, moves into the living quarters behind the shop. Gervaise’s main concern about where she would put the dirty laundry seems silly, but Lantier’s solution is symbolic. He suggests taking a large box, putting the dirty laundry in it, and placing the box under his bed.

Ironically, Gervaise justifies her relationship with Lantier by reasoning that his bed is cleaner than Coupeau’s and she has no other place to sleep. When Coupeau comes home drunk one night and vomits on the bed, Gervaise spends the night with Lantier. This soon becomes a habit:

Avec l’entrée de l’amant au foyer la corruption morale s’installe sous le lit conjugal. L’idée de loger Lantier sous leur toit vient de Coupeau, mais Zola blame Gervaise par ses constantes allusions à la saleté. L’ancien amant s’installera donc au foyer familial et précipitera grandement la chute de la malheureuse. (Hansen 47)

Zola repeatedly makes a connection between Gervaise’s affair with Lantier and the “saleté” that slowly creeps into the shop:
Mais Gervaise se trouvait très bien là-dedans. Elle n’avait pas vu la boutique se salir; elle s’y abandonnait et s’habitual au papier déchiré, aux boiseries graisseuses, comme elle en arrivait à porter des jupes fendues et à ne plus laver les oreilles. Même la saleté était un nid chaud où elle jouissait de s’accroupir. (L’Assommoir 337)

Since cleanliness is the most important quality in a laundress, it doesn’t take long for Gervaise’s customers to take their business elsewhere. Ultimately she comes to see the shop as a burden and wants only to be rid of it.

As Gervaise begins to lose interest in her business, she also begins to lose interest in her children. Allowing Lantier to sleep in their living quarters requires her to send her own son to sleep in the laundry shop. She does this without hesitation. Her declining commitment to motherhood is also evident in her decision to send Nana out to be cared for by another woman during the day. Her eldest son Claude has already been sent away to school with little maternal grief on the part of Gervaise. Etienne’s departure soon follows when he takes an apprenticeship.

Gervaise’s inability to create separate places in her life for work and family creates a situation in which a problem in one aspect of her life leads to failure in all
others. There is little distinction between her life and her occupation. Even after she is no longer working, Gervaise does not create an identity for herself apart from her former occupation. She is referred to as “la blanchisseuse” long after she has left the profession.

Throughout the novel Gervaise’s external surroundings frequently mirror her internal state. After she loses her laundry shop, her living quarters become progressively smaller and more impoverished as her alcoholism progresses. When she is reduced to begging in the street, she feels a sense of malaise when she sees the improvements taking place:

Son ennui venait de ce que, précisément, le quartier s’embellissait à l’heure où elle-même tournait à la ruine. On n’aime pas, quand on est dans la crotte, recevoir un rayon en plein sur la tête. (L’Assommoir 448)

This parallel between external environment and internal state can also be seen in Nana. At the beginning of the novel, Nana is living in a hotel which is only half-furnished. The rooms are large, with plenty of empty spaces waiting to be filled. This is symbolic of the void in her life which she seeks to fill:
L’appartement, trop vaste pour elle, n’avait jamais été meublé complètement. Cela sentait la fille lâchée trop tôt par son premier monsieur sérieux, retombée à des amants louches, tout un début difficile, un lançage manqué, entravé par des refus de crédit et des menaces d’expulsion (Nana 52).

As in the case of Gervaise, Nana’s living quarters and workplace occupy the same space. As a prostitute, Nana’s workplace is the most private room in the home, the bedroom. The architecture of the apartment is rather convenient for Nana’s profession, since each room opens into a corridor. It is not necessary to pass through the parlor. This makes it easier for the maid to keep Nana’s clients from seeing one another as they are coming and going. Even so, the sheer number of callers makes it difficult for Zoé to find a space for each of them:

Mais la sonnerie, continuellement, dérangeait la femme de chambre, qui laissait Madame à moitié lacée chaussée d’un pied seulement. Elle perdait la tête malgré son expérience. Après avoir mis des hommes un peu partout, en utilisant les moindres coins, elle venait d’être obligée d’en
Nana does a poor job of keeping her work-related appointments organized. Her clients treat her home as if it were open to the public. Nana has created this situation by having frequent parties to which everyone is invited. When Nana wants privacy, she is forced to escape through the service entrance and seek it in the streets.

On one occasion she hosts a late-night dinner, in which she speaks of bringing the restaurant into her home (105). A large portion of her guests have come directly from a banquet at the home of Count Muffat. Although openly discussing Nana in the home of the count would have been in very poor taste, people whisper to one another, “chez Nana à minuit, n’est-ce pas?” (101).

Many more guests arrive than are expected and Nana doesn’t even know them all. With a great deal of effort, it is possible to seat everyone at the table, elbows touching, each plate touching the one on either side. Nana fills the empty space of her large half-furnished apartment with strangers of various social positions.

It is interesting that this party occurs on the night of Nana’s theatre debut. Nana is at the pinnacle of her success. For the moment, she manages to control her
environment. Nevertheless, this is a very tenuous sort of control, which Nana is unable to maintain for very long. The crowd at the party is barely contained, each individual threatening to ease outside his or her designated space at the table.

Virtually everything that occurs following this spectacular dinner party shows Nana struggling to maintain the ability to separate the various aspects of her personal and professional life. The disorder evident in Nana’s home can also be seen in the theatre through which she makes her entrance into the demi-monde:

Il y avait là un étalage d’articles de bazar, tordus, salis par l’usage, des cuvettes ébrechées, des peignes de corne édentés, tout ce que la hâte et le sans-gêne des deux femmes se déshabillant, se débarbouillant en commun, laissent autour d’elles de désordre, dans un lieu où elles ne font que passer et dont la saleté ne les touche plus. (170)

The importance of space and environment is shown by the episode in which Nana leaves Paris for the country. Away from the corruption of the city, another aspect of her personality appears:
Nana, entre les bras du petit, retrouvait ses quinze ans. C’était, sous la caresse de cette enfance, une fleur d’amour refleurissant chez elle, dans l’habitude et le dégoût de l’homme. Il lui venait des rougeurs subites, un émoi qui la laissait frissonnante, un besoin de rire et de pleurer, toute une virginité inquiète, traversée de désirs, dont elle restait honteuse. Jamais elle n’avait éprouvé cela. La campagne la trempait de tendresse. (Nana 194)

However, before this change of scenery can have any lasting effect on Nana’s personality and lifestyle, she invites her business associates from Paris to join her in the villa, thus bringing the pollution and corruption of Paris into the country. In a matter of days she returns to Paris and her experiences in the country are forgotten.

It is doubtful that external boundaries could have prevented Nana’s downfall due to the enormous pitfalls associated with her profession. Maintaining a distance between one’s self and others was particularly difficult for the working woman, and it was even more difficult for the prostitute.

Each stage of Nana’s decline is precipitated by a further erosion of boundaries. Although Nana is always
promiscuous, her relationships are strictly heterosexual until she begins her association with Satin. Nana comes to feel quite at ease in Satin’s home, surrounded by squalor:

Ces jours-là, c’était plus sale, on ne pouvait plus entrer, parce qu’il y avait des choses tombées en travers des portes. Et Nana se sentait très bien chez elle, assise à ne rien faire, au milieu du lit défait, des cuvettes qui traînaient par terre, des jupons crottés de la veille, tâchant de boue les fauteuils. Toutes les conversations aboutissaient à la saleté des hommes. (257)

From another point of view, the homosexual relationship between Nana and Satin is an attempt to create a boundary between herself and her male clients, who she feels make far too many demands on her. Schor mentions this polarization of women and men which was a common form of escapism for courtesans:

Nana’s scorn of men is matched, counterbalanced, by her sense of comradeship with other women. Elements of this compensatory theme of female bonding are disseminated throughout the literature of the courtesan, but in Nana they all
converge, producing a vision of an antisociety composed exclusively of women. (Schor 91)

Nana’s behavior later descends even further as she becomes involved with Muffat. She crosses the line between human and animal:

Une luxure les détraquait, les jetait aux imaginations délirantes de la chair. Les anciennes épouvantes dévotes de leur nuit d’insomnie tournaient maintenant en une soif de bestialité, une fureur de se mettre à quatre pattes, de grogner et de mordre. (446)

At this point it seems that Nana can decline no further. Her only means of survival is to physically remove herself from her environment. She leaves abruptly, breaking off all ties with her associates in Paris. Although Zola gives few details of her activities during her absence, she seems to survive quite well until she returns to Paris. It is Nana’s reintroduction into this chaotic environment that brings about her death.

Denise, who of the three women studied, has the least amount of control over her physical environment due to the constraints placed on her by her employer, ultimately achieves the greatest level of success. Perhaps this is because she never loses sight of her goal to create a
separate space. It seems that the most important factor in a working woman’s success is the desire and intention to create a separate space where private life can be enjoyed, even when circumstances prevent her from creating this space in reality.

Gervaise finds a measure of success for as long as she is able to hold onto her vision of a nice home for her family. Nana’s downfall occurs very quickly because she never makes any attempt at creating a separate place where she can retreat from the sordid activities required by her profession.

Without the benefit of spatial boundaries, the working woman is left with few defenses against the corrupting influence of others. This exterior “Other” poses a very real threat to the well-being of the woman and her family. The influence of the Other will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Obstacles Faced by the Working Woman

The working woman in Zola’s literature faces many challenges. She has to create a separate identity for herself, apart from the influences of heredity and the pressures of her environment. It is also necessary to create a division of space between work and home life. Failure to create such boundaries leaves women vulnerable to the intrusive “Other” which could bring destruction upon the working woman and her family. Other threats to the working woman come from destructive individuals, particularly men, to whom the woman becomes emotionally vulnerable.

Jean-Paul Sartre theorized that the Other provides a structured opposition against which an individual defines him or her self:

Autrui, c'est l'autre, c'est à dire le moi qui n'est pas moi... Autrui, c'est celui qui n'est pas moi et que je ne suis pas; ma chute originelle c’est l’existence de l’autre; et la honte est, comme la fierté, l’appréhension de moi-même comme nature, encore que cette nature même m’échappe et soit inconnais
telle. Je saisis le regard de l’autre au sein même de mon acte, comme solidification et aliénation de mes propres possibilités. (Sartre 118-19)

The Other is the collective outside observer, who passes judgment, either justly or unjustly, on anyone who fails to conform to its fickle standards of propriety. A double standard is evident, and women are judged far more harshly by the Other than men. The woman who fails is criticized by the superior Other. The woman who succeeds is criticized by the jealous Other.

Gervaise experiences both sorts of criticism. Prior to her opening the laundry shop, her in-laws ridicule her for having such an aspiration. Once the laundry shop becomes a reality, she is criticized for having borrowed the money from Goujet. As a social mechanism, the Other seems to function as a mechanism to keep individual members of the working class from aspiring to join the bourgeoisie.

For Gervaise the Other takes the form of an entire community which conspires against her. She operates under constant surveillance:

Gervaise est toujours au centre de regards qui la traquent. Souvent un cercle de curieux jaloux l’enserre: ainsi, au lavoir, ou lorsqu’elle
revient de voir Coupeau à l'hôpital, etc... Le quartier, personnage anonyme et multiple, est là, qui regarde et commente sa vie et le plus souvent avec une curiosité hostile. (Becker 42)

Gossip is the weapon of the neighborhood. Gervaise is particularly vulnerable to this because she lacks a supportive family to defend her against it. Her in-laws are among her worst enemies. For a time Gervaise maintains her positive attitude, refusing to let the mistreatment of others sink too far into her identity.

Although Gervaise is hurt by the comments of her in-laws, she does not join in with their bickering. Instead, she focuses on the goal of opening her own business:

Elle ne détestait personne; dans le feu de son désir, elle défendit même les Lorilleux; ils n’étaient pas méchants au fond, on s’entendrait très bien. (L’Assommoir 140)

Gervaise’s life becomes progressively worse as she allows the Other to corrupt her individuality. For years Gervaise is able to ignore the unjust persecution of the Other as collective outside observer. Yet she proves vulnerable to Lantier, who invades her home and workplace, and divides the loyalties of her family.
Gervaise’s daughter Nana is the product of her upbringing in an environment contaminated by the hostile Other. When Nana makes her debut at the theatre the Other takes the form of the public who observes her onstage. Her position is adversarial. It is as if she is standing alone, against the entire bourgeois society. She is a kind of victim since it is her role to offer her body to others. She is in a vulnerable state, standing nude before them, but at first public opinion is in her favor. Nana uses this to her advantage. She enters into a mutually exploitative relationship with her admirers. They take what they can from her and she robs them of their material possessions. She is repeatedly described as a “mangeuse d’hommes”:

Nana, en quelques mois, les mangea goulûment, les uns après les autres. Les besoins croissants de son luxe enrageaient ses appétits, elle nettoyait un homme d’un coup de dent. Un homme ruiné tombait de ses mains comme un fruit mûr, pour se pourrir à terre, de lui-même. (Nana 439)

This symbolic cannibalism reflects an erosion of boundaries, both spatial and corporeal between Nana and the men with whom she associates. When one consumes something,
the thing being eaten loses its own identity and becomes a part of the person who ate it.

When Nana consumes the wealth of one man after another, she robs them of more than mere money. Philippe loses his liberty, and Georges, his life. The Other ceases to be a mere observer and commentator and becomes a temptation to which Nana willingly submits. The pathology of the men who so willingly give in to her desires ends up infecting Nana as well. This driving need to consume everything in sight is indicative of Nana’s need to fill a void inside herself:

Cependant, dans son luxe, au milieu de cette cour, Nana s’ennuyait à crever. Elle avait des hommes pour toutes les minutes de la nuit, et de l’argent jusque dans les tiroirs de sa toilette, mêlé aux peignes et aux brosses; mais ça ne la contentait plus, elle sentait comme un vide quelque part, un trou qui la faisait bâiller.

(326)

Nana consistently fails to recognize the threat posed by the Other. The only real external threat she perceives is from the police. The government is the Other, in the most broad and impersonal sense. More specifically, the police form a collective Other which mirrors the way
society looks at prostitutes. Her continual forays to the Rue de la Goutte d’Or with Satin bring her into direct contact with law enforcement. Although fear of confrontation with the police fails to motivate Nana to change her behavior, she demonstrates a real dread of coming into contact with them:

Elle avait toujours tremblé devant la loi, cette puissance inconnue, cette vengeance des hommes qui pouvaient la supprimer, sans que personne au monde la défendît. (Nana 277)

Unlike Nana, Denise manages to escape the corruption of the Other and ultimately to thrive in her career and her personal relationships. In Denise’s case, the Other takes the form of her co-workers in the department store.

Her co-workers do everything possible to make her feel unwelcome, resorting to petty and unkind comments about her appearance. Although their behavior is cruel, it is understandable in the competitive environment of the department store, where the arrival of a new sales clerk means fewer sales for the others. To those already working in the department, it is Denise who is the Other:

Elles la déshabillaient du coin de l’œil, sans bienveillance, avec la sourde hostilité des gens
à table qui n’aiment pas se serrer pour faire place aux faims du dehors. (Bonheur 83)

The management of the Bonheur des Dames deliberately pits one employee against another with a commission-based system of compensation. The most aggressive sales clerks are able to earn enormous sums of money, but only by keeping the weaker employees, especially newcomers, from advancing. Despite the insults and the financial deprivation she suffers because of her co-workers, Denise refuses to give up:

Mais elle espérait bien arriver ainsi à douze cents francs. Seulement, pour atteindre ce gros chiffre, elle devait se montrer travailleuse et forte, ne pas se chagriner des mauvaises volontés autour d’elle, se battre et arracher sa part aux camarades, s’il le fallait. Elle s’excitait ainsi à la lutte. (Bonheur 126)

The Other is not the only threat to the working woman. Perhaps even more threatening is the intruder who, once permitted into the life of an individual, contaminates him or her with a sinister agenda which has nothing to do with the individual’s original aspirations. For the women in this study, this threat comes most frequently from men to
whom they become emotionally vulnerable. Gervaise encounters this problem in the person of Lantier.

It is the return of Lantier that precipitates a change of attitude in Gervaise. He was her first lover, the man who seduced her in her youth, and it is his influence that leads her to sacrifice her loyalty to her ideals. For the first time, the Other has a legitimate reason to criticize Gervaise. Ironically, this is the first time she shows resentment toward her critics. She justifies her actions by pointing to the hypocrisy she sees around her:

Ah! elle en savait, la cochonnerie pissait de partout, ça empoisonnait les maisons d’alentour! Oui, oui, quelque chose de propre que l’homme et la femme, dans ce coin de Paris, où l’on est les uns sur les autres, à cause de la misère!

(L’Assommoir 330)

It is ultimately Gervaise’s failure to defend herself against these threats that precipitates her ruin. Lantier, one of the others observing her life from outside, is invited into the family home. Once inside he sows the seeds of destruction, and he does this so subtly that Gervaise does not even realize how she is being manipulated.
Lantier encourages Coupeau to drink more and to avoid work. He also demands expensive food and wine, straining the budget to which he fails to contribute. He wears Gervaise down psychologically until she is willing to become his mistress.

Because of her emotional vulnerability to Lantier, Gervaise falls victim to his machinations against her. This damages her business, her health, her marriage and her relationship with her children. Lantier is a particularly harmful influence in Nana’s life. He corrupts her by turning her against her mother while she is still in early childhood. In part because of this influence, Nana seems to become particularly vulnerable to the weakening and corrupting effect of others.

Mais ça l’achevait, la fréquentation d’un tas de filles déjà éreintées de misère et de vice. On était là les unes sur les autres, on se pourrissait ensemble; juste l’histoire des paniers de pommes, quand il y a des pommes gâtées. (L’Assommoir 424)

Here, the contamination by the Other appears as a group illness: the peer group spreads contamination among its members through their sharing of mutual misery and degradation.
Nana’s preoccupation with momentary pleasures appears as a response to this misery, but it is an unsatisfying one, since it inevitably creates an emotional void within her. Since she fails to create a separate and independent identity of her own, the void within her becomes uncomfortably evident when she finds herself alone, with nothing to distract her. Although she lacks true friendship, she is surrounded by other people at all times. “La solitude l’attristait tout de suite, car elle s’y retournait avec le vide de l’ennui d’elle-même” (Nana 328)

It is perhaps this emptiness within that pushes Nana into her abusive relationship with Fontan. She abandons her career and plays the role of bourgeois wife. Nana, who has always been strong-willed, becomes quite passive under Fontan’s abuse. After the couple exhausts Nana’s savings she is forced to return to prostitution in order to maintain his spending habits. However, she does not return to the theatre and her bourgeois clients. During her relationship with Fontan, she engages in the lowest forms of street prostitution. It seems as if her devotion to him increases proportionally to his abuse:

Elle fut horriblement blessée. Toute la soirée, il la blagua, en l’appelant Mlle Mars. Et plus il tapait sur elle, plus elle tenait bon, goûtant
une jouissance amère dans cet heroïsme de sa toquade, qui la rendait très grande et très amoureuse à ses propres yeux. Depuis qu’elle allait avec d’autres pour le nourrir, elle l’aimait davantage, de toute la fatigue et de tous les dégoûts qu’elle rapportait. Il devenait son vice, qu’elle payait, son besoin, dont elle ne pouvait se passer, sous l’aiguillon des gifles. (Nana 279)

Although she never brings customers into the apartment she shares with Fontan, Nana seems to bring the corruption of the streets home with her. It ultimately becomes apparent that her relationship with Fontan is incompatible with her career as a prostitute. Nana returns home one night to discover that Fontan has locked her out and replaced her with another woman. She has nowhere to go except back to the streets.

She quickly returns to the theatre and makes no further attempt at having a romantic relationship. Her attitude toward her career seems to change. It is as if she realizes that the Other (her clients and the world they belong to, with its corrupt social order) will not permit her to have a loving relationship, so she decides to become
the Other contaminating those around her. One by one, Nana’s clients fall victim to her corrupting influence:

Le ferment des pourritures sociales, avait empoisonné ces hommes . . . C’était bien, c’était juste, elle avait vengé son monde, les gueux et les abandonnés. (Nana 457)

This revenge is the closest thing to victory or success that Nana experiences.

Denise, however, does experience real success. Not only does she manage to minimize the effects of the Other’s criticism, she also manages to resist the temptation to be corrupted by her employer Mouret. He poses the greatest threat to her because of her emotional vulnerability to him. However, her self-awareness works in her favor, and she consistently acts to remove herself from temptation rather than give in to it. This is no easy task, considering Mouret’s skill at manipulating women. He exploits the weaknesses of women of all classes, primarily his bourgeois clientele, but also his working class employees:

Il était femme, elles se sentaient pénétrées et possédées par ce sens délicat qu’il avait de leur être secret, et elles s’abandonnaient, séduites; tandis que lui, certain dès lors de les avoir à
Just as Nana is described as “mangeuse d’hommes”, Mouret is repeatedly described as “mangeur de femmes”. However, Mouret is warned “c’est toujours l’agneau qui finit par manger le loup” (120). Denise is the only person who refuses to allow herself to be consumed by Mouret. Denise holds onto her convictions, and rather than being corrupted by Mouret, she becomes his wife.

In this way she conquers him. Just as she is willing to turn her back on her uncle and seek to improve her fortune, she demonstrates her willingness to turn her back on Mouret. It is the threat of her departure that motivates Mouret to join with Denise on her terms rather than his own:

Tout un rapport vague s’élevait dans son esprit: le vol de cette malheureuse, cette folie dernière de la clientèle conquise, abattue aux pieds du tentateur, évoquait l’image fière et vengeresse de Denise, dont il sentait sur sa gorge le talon victorieux. (Bonheur 488)

Marriage itself is a dissolution of boundaries between two individuals. Denise refuses to even consider marriage
until she has established a strong personal identity. Even then, she demonstrates a desire to protect herself against the malicious gossip of the Other. It is only when Mouret offers a solution “qui fermerait la bouche du monde” (495) that she agrees.

Denise demonstrates a loyalty to herself that ultimately benefits everyone around her. This loyalty to the self and to creating and preserving boundaries around the self is essential to the success of the working woman. This is Denise’s primary tool in protecting her interests against the judgmental Other. This is also what enables her to give in to the emotional weakness she experiences with Mouret while maintaining control over her own fate.

In the cases of Gervaise and Nana, their failure to maintain a loyalty to the self allows for the intrusion of and corruption by the Other. They willingly allow abusive men to control them and rob them of their individuality. This ultimately leads to their downfall and in some cases, the downfall of those around them.
CONCLUSION

The creation of boundaries is essential to the success of the working woman in nineteenth-century France. This is illustrated in many of Zola’s works. Forming a boundary between the self and family members provides protection against the influence of genetic and hereditary family tendencies. Gervaise, the protagonist of *L’Assommoir* and Nana, of the novel by the same name, fail to establish these types of boundaries, and they continue the cycle of dysfunction that has existed in their family for generations. However, Denise, of *Au Bonheur des Dames* avoids these pitfalls. By separating her own destiny from that of her family, Denise manages to thrive in her working environment as well as her personal life.

Creating a division of space between work and personal life is also important. Failure to create this type of boundary allows problems from one aspect of a woman’s life to contaminate all others. However, working conditions in nineteenth-century France made creating this type of boundary extremely difficult. All three characters in this study are required to live in the same location where they work. Gervaise lives out her personal problems in front of the public eye, while Nana leaves her admirers in her
apartment and seeks privacy in the street. However, Denise works to find creative solutions to the lack of privacy in her life and ultimately manages to succeed.

Failure to establish boundaries leaves the working woman open to criticism by the Other. The Other can best be described as a collective anonymous observer against whose judgment the individual derives his or her self-worth. Equally harmful are destructive individuals, often men to whom the woman becomes emotionally vulnerable. A working woman without boundaries has few defenses against the corrupting influence of an abusive man once he has entered her home. Gervaise, who allows Lantier to enter her home and workplace and corrupt her life, is brought to destruction. Nana’s destruction is even swifter, as she makes no attempt to protect herself from the harmful influences of those with whom she associates.

Denise, who perceives the threat of the Other right away, is vigilant enough to establish boundaries and protect herself. She therefore provides an example of a working woman who takes the steps necessary to succeed, even in the harsh conditions of nineteenth-century Paris. Rather than acting instinctively on emotions she has not consciously examined, Denise has a self-awareness of her
emotional vulnerability to Mouret, and takes measure to protect herself from corruption by him.

The working woman in nineteenth-century France faces great obstacles in achieving success. However, Zola illustrates through the character of Denise Baudu that success is possible if the woman in question approaches challenges with strength and determination.
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