

# **Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight Study Guide**

**Au Bonheur Des Dames = the Ladies' Delight by Émile Zola**

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## Plot Summary

*Au Bonheur des Dames* presents a look at late nineteenth century Paris and the introduction of the large department store. It takes a close look at the conditions in the department store, as well as the appeal to its customers and affect on the small businesses. This backdrop is the scene of a developing romance between Mouret, the store's owner, and a girl from the provinces, Denise, an unlikely match given their different social status. As Denise learns about the struggle for survival, Mouret discovers that his money cannot buy what he really wants.

Denise arrives in Paris with her brothers a year after her parents have died. She is hoping to get a promised job in her uncle Baudu's shop. Her uncle does not give her a warm welcome. Denise ends up getting a job at the department store, but after almost a year is still not able to make ends meet. She takes extra work, which leads to her dismissal. She spends two months in poverty, until her uncle's friend and her landlord gives her a job, even though he does not need any help in his struggling business. Denise works with him for several months until she finds a job at another shop.

Mouret uses and exploits women, including Madame Desforges. After the luck in the store's expansion after his first wife died, he vows not to marry again, but to use up the women of Paris to make his fortune. As the store grows and the success exceeds his dreams, he finds that he cannot stop thinking of Denise. When she returns to the store as the other shop is dying, Mouret becomes obsessed with her. However, Denise refuses to be bought. She wants to remain respectable, mostly for practical reasons of keeping her life calm and predictable.

Baudu's struggle against the large department store ruins his family. His assistant leaves to pursue a sordid salesgirl instead of marrying Baudu's daughter, Geneviève, and taking over the business. This blow kills Geneviève. Her death represents the death of the old ways of trade in the neighborhood, as all the businesses are being crushed by the department store. Soon after, Baudu's wife also dies. Baudu's neighbor Bourras, resists letting Mouret get his house, but eventually Mouret finds a way to expand the store to take up the whole block.

Mouret suffers with desire for Denise. He gives up his affairs, and loses his interest in his business's success. Denise is worried about the rumors in the department store about her. She becomes friends with Mouret, but still resists becoming his mistress. She decides to leave the store, knowing that she will soon give in to Mouret otherwise, and not wanting the other employees to think poorly of her. Mouret does not want her to leave. He realizes he would rather marry her than suffer any more. She prepares to go on her planned leave, where Mouret will marry her and bring her back with a spotless reputation.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Denise and her brothers come to Paris a year after their parents' death, hoping for help from their uncle. Their uncle, however, is suffering from the competition of the growing shop Au Bonheur des Dames across the street. As the shop seduces Denise and consumes the neighborhood, its owner, Octave Mouret is finally conquered himself.

Denise and her brothers P  p   and Jean arrive in Paris after an exhausting trip. They are looking for their uncle's shop when they become entranced by Au Bonheur des Dames. The three children present an odd sight to the neighborhood as they stand gawking at the extravagant and luring displays. One of the neighbors is watching the three strangers. He turns out to be their uncle. Denise is repulsed by his small, dreary shop. Denise greets her uncle, who had written her after her parents' deaths that he would always have a place for her at his shop. However, that letter is nearly a year old when Denise arrives unannounced. Uncle Baudu is caught off-guard by the arrival of his niece and two nephews. Denise quickly explains the circumstances. Jean is starting a new apprenticeship with an ivory craftsman the next day. Denise thought she and P  p   would be no worse off than they were in Valgones, where she could not make enough money to feed all three of them. Denise leaves out the details of Jean's womanizing ways and her desire to keep an eye on him in Paris. Baudu introduces the children to his wife and daughter Madame Baudu and Genevi  ve.

As Baudu and Denise talk further, he reveals that business is no longer doing well enough to take Denise on in the shop. Baudu's resentment at his lack of luck escapes with a rising voice as he chides Denise for not letting him know her plans. She starts to leave when Baudu stops her. He offers to let her stay for the night and figure things out in the morning. Madame Baudu and Genevi  ve recommend Madame Gras, who can take P  p   for forty francs a month. Denise just needs a job and a place to live. Baudu takes her to meet Vin  ard, a silk shop owner, who has been looking for a salesgirl. Vin  ard is trying to sell his business to Robineau, the silk assistant buyer at Au Bonheur des Dames. Vin  ard has already filled his position, but Robineau mentions an opening in the ladies' wear department in his store.

Denise has already been attracted to the large, machine-like store. On the way home, her uncle rants about the Au Bonheur des Dames owner, Mouret, and his good luck, and the ruthless way he is crushing all of the neighboring businesses. Denise and Baudu meet Bourras, next-door neighbor to the Au Bonheur des Dames, who makes a declaration of war against Mouret for trying to buy out his lease to expand the large store. At dinner, Baudu rages further against the competing store and the new way of business that threatens him and all of his neighbors. However, after dinner, Denise watches the enticing shop across the street. Baudu realizes that Denise has been seduced, and that she will go tomorrow to get a job there.



## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces Denise and her brothers, who are her responsibility now, even though she is only 20 years old, and their dire circumstances. It also introduces her Uncle Baudu and all of the characters connected to his store, the Vieil Elbeuf, including his wife Madame Élisabeth Baudu, Geneviève, and Colomban, who are all affected by the battle going on between the old and new ways of doing business. Chapter 1 also introduces the neighborhood shops that are threatened by the successful Au Bonheur des Dames.

Denise is drawn to Au Bonheur des Dames for many reasons. One of them is a "yearning for life and light" (Chapter 1, p. 17). Denise recognizes that her uncle's shop, as well as his way of doing business, is dying a slow, painful death. In contrast, Au Bonheur des Dames is thriving, even expanding. It is full of life. This sets up a repeated image contrast of the dark dying shops to the light thriving department store.

Baudu and his neighbor Bourras both plan to make a stand against their competitor until their own deaths. Their rants provide an indirect introduction to Mouret and his history of going from a womanizing adventurer new to Paris to sole owner of this incredibly successful shop and its new way of doing business.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Too early to apply for a job, Denise waits awkwardly outside Au Bonheur des Dames while Mouret rushes into the store. He goes to his study and meets with his right-hand man, Bourdoncle. Together, they start a thorough inspection of the store. They start in the reception area, where crates of goods are being unloaded in preparation for a big sale. In reception, Mouret and Bourdoncle meet Bouthemont, the buyer in the silk department. Mouret and Bourdoncle argue about the price of the special silk on which they are staking the store's future. Bouthemont also describes his difficulties with Gaujean, the silk manufacturer.

Mouret and Bourdoncle move to the dispatch department, where they discuss a mistake in a delivery from the previous day. After touring the mail order department, Bourdoncle reprimands Albert, the son of the ladies' wear buyer and a cash desk clerk, about the mistake. Albert's father Lhomme, the chief cashier, rushes to defend his son in regard to the mistake. Mouret plays benefactor and forgives Albert. Bourdoncle responds by tearing down other staff throughout the rest of their tour, while Mouret continues to smooth over the conflicts like a good prince. In the silk department, the two salesmen Hutin and Favier are undermining Robineau's authority. Hutin wants Robineau's job. Robineau tells Mouret that they need more room. Hutin is fussing over a display, which Mouret takes over and turns into a stunning presentation.

While Mouret is still in the silk department, Denise arrives, flustered and somehow not able to follow instructions to find the ladies' wear department. She stops and looks at the display Mouret has created, and this endears her to Mouret. Hutin takes extra care to direct Denise, which makes a big impression on her. Denise waits in the ladies' wear department for Madame Aurélie, the buyer and prospective hiring manager. While Denise waits, the two sales girls and the assistant buyer treat her with hostility. When Madame Aurélie arrives, the two sales girls help start an argument between the buyer and assistant buyer. Denise finally tells Madame Aurélie that she wants to apply for a job, just as Mouret arrives in the department on his tour of the store. All four women in the department want to reject her, but Mouret intervenes, still enchanted by Denise's reaction to his silk display. Denise leaves, not sure whether she will get the job (or even if she wants it), and runs into Henry Deloche again, who she had met outside the store earlier in the morning and who has also just applied for a job.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the imagery of the machinery of the big department store with amazing detail and clarity with Mouret's first big tour of the main departments, including receiving, mail order, the counting house, the silk department, and the ladies' wear department. A mistake with a delivery introduces the Lhomme dynasty, with



Madame Aurélie as the undisputed head. This chapter also presents the conflict in the silk department, where Hutin undermines Robineau because he wants the assistant-buyer's job. This competition exists throughout the store, but it is most brutal in the silk department. Finally, this chapter introduces the ladies' wear department, with its petty, hostile sales girls.

This chapter introduces the tension between Mouret and Bourdoncle, who started at the store at the same time, which serves to explain Mouret's business philosophy of selling at a discount but in large volume. It also provides a good presentation for Mouret's ideas for motivating the staff, such as paying the sales staff a commission and giving a bonus in the counting house for every mistake found. Bourdoncle, in contrast, claims to not understand the publicity approach that Mouret uses and is there to ensure the store still makes a profit. He also serves as executioner, while Mouret is the benefactor. Bourdoncle predicts that the women (including customers) that Mouret uses will have revenge. This foreshadows the effect Denise has on Mouret later in the novel.

Denise and Mouret encounter each other outside the store, in the silk department, and in the ladies' wear department. Denise senses something about Mouret, but thinks that he is the head of a department. Mouret is interested in her, although he does not think she is pretty at first. Madame Aurélie plans to give Denise the job, even though she is the sixth applicant for one position, and not necessarily very qualified for it, because she wants to gain favor with Mouret. Denise is humiliated by the terrifying attitudes from the other sales girls, but she gains courage at the thought of her and Pépé and their need for money. She is attracted to Hutin, because he is the only one who is nice to her, although he was just putting on his salesman charm. Mouret plays the benevolent prince, even with Denise when he offers advice and goodwill for her uncle.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Madame Desforges, Mouret's lover, hosts a gathering of friends for tea, including many of the ladies who are Mouret's customers. Mouret hopes to meet one of her former lovers, Baron Hartmann, the director of the Crédit Immobilier. As the guests arrive, Mouret meets an old school friend, Paul Vallagnosc. They talk about what they have been doing since school. Madame Desforges introduces Mouret to the Baron. Mouret flatters him about the Crédit Immobilier and a new road being planned, secretly concerned about his plans for expansion at Au Bonheur des Dames. Mouret shares his business plan, being truthful about its precarious position, and seeking to establish a partnership with the Baron. The Baron resists at first, having already helped several of Madame Desforges' friends. Talking in a corner with the Baron, Mouret explains his business practices. Meanwhile, in the next room, the ladies unknowingly illustrate what good customers they are. The Baron begins to understand Mouret's methods.

The ladies call Mouret back into the room to ask about the upcoming sale and the Paris-Bonheur. Mouret tells them about other materials that will be available. The ladies discuss Sauveur, the dressmaker, and Mouret reveals that the dressmaker buys many of her materials at Au Bonheur des Dames. He entices them to the sale by talking of the bargains. Madame Marty, the compulsive shopper, finally gives in to the urge to show off her purchases, even though her nearly destitute husband is present. As the ladies look at the goodies, the Baron begins to realize the power that Mouret has over women. He warns, as Bourdoncle has, that some woman will take revenge for them. The Baron tries to discreetly warn Madame Desforges that Mouret will devour her, but he is convinced that if the sale on Monday goes well, he can make a deal with Mouret over the land to allow Mouret to expand even more.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 introduces the society characters who come to Madame Desforges' Saturday teas. Madame Desforges knows that Mouret is using her to get to Baron Hartman, but she is falling in love with him. She is planning to figure out a way to keep from losing him. When the ladies talk about the different goods and costs of items, they reveal what kind of shoppers they are. Madame Bourdelais is the thrifty shopper. Madame de Boves is filled with desire for things she cannot afford, because her husband does not give her spending money. Madame Marty is the compulsive shopper. Madame Guibal is too dignified to talk about bargains. Madame Desforges is also too high-class to buy clothes at Au Bonheur des Dames.

When Mouret catches up with his old school friend, it provides an in-depth look at Mouret's philosophy of life and his plans to exploit the women of Paris. He talks about the opportunity for his sales staff to make more money than more educated men, a





statement about the blurring of class lines. Mouret's discussions with Baron Hartman introduce his business philosophies. Mouret knows that getting to the Baron through Madame Desforges is more effective than meeting him in his office. Mouret understands the power that women hold, but he plans to exploit that power to get rich. Baron Hartman predicts that some woman will revenge all the rest, foreshadowing the effect that Denise has on Mouret later in the novel.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Au Bonheur des Dames is ready for the big winter sale. Denise arrives in her department for her first day of work in time to hear the salesgirls Clara and Marguerite arguing about who is first. When Denise's turn comes, the customer is a regular, and Madame Aurélie, the buyer, will not let her make the sale. Denise holds back her tears while she does the work assigned to her, wondering how she will make enough money for Pépé and Jean if they do not let her sell. Mouret waits in the hall, nervous that no one will come to the sale. As he watches the crowds slowly swell, the silk department employees demonstrate their fierce competition and rivalry for sales and sexual conquests.

Madame Desforges comes to the sale, illustrating the manner of a distinguished woman. She joins other customers and friends from her tea, Madame Marty and Valentine, and they all go to the silk department, where they meet frugal Madame Bourdelais briefly. Hutin puts on his charm for the ladies, but Madame Desforges encourages Madame Marty to get something better. Irritated with the circumstances and at himself for choosing to wait on a poor customer, Hutin escorts the ladies to the ladies' wear department, where no one but Denise is available. Denise attempts to serve them, but instead becomes Marguerite's coat model, and everyone, including the customers, the other sales girls, and even Mouret, criticize her big dress and messy hair. Amidst this humiliation, Pauline, a salesgirl from lingerie, encourages Denise to stay strong so that she can make it through this initiation.

At the end of the day, the sales people figure up their percentages, while Mouret and Bourdoncle await the total figures from Lhomme. The final astounding figure is larger than any ladies' wear shop has ever made in a single day. Mouret is sure they could sell more with more space. Denise goes back to her room and, once again in her own clothes, allows herself the emotional release she has held back all day.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter starts with the store awakening to its big sale day. The vans wait outside to deliver goods all over Paris, and Baudu watches with hateful eyes. The vans are a symbol of the new business ways with its name presence and advertising. Baudu recognizes the success the vans symbolize, but refuses to change his own business ways. This chapter also presents a dark side of these new ways in the store's employees. They make fun of people, undermine and back-stab each other, put on fake airs to impress each other and their customers, and think of nothing but their percentages to make enough money for their spending and bets. Like the employees, the customers have a dark side as well. While the department store provides a better quality of life to middle-class people, the modest customers are too easily carried away



with desire for more (goods and status), even when they cannot afford it, as Madame Marty illustrates.

Denise knows the only way she can take care of her brothers is to somehow make it in this harsh environment, stealing customers away just like the other sales people. She feels very alone, afraid of reprimand even for making a friend, when the competition inside the department and with other departments is so fierce. The machine imagery extends to Denise's person as she no longer feels human, but just a machine herself as well as a cog in the overall machine.

Throughout the chapter, there is imagery referencing both a battleground, and storms or floods. Other important imagery involves the comparison of sexual abandonment to the ladies' fate once they start shopping inside the store.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Denise encounters Mouret one more time before spending the next two months working hard, trying to adapt to the hard labor of working at the shop. She still does not win any respect from her coworkers. She fears Bourdoncle, who is set against her, as well as Jouve, an inspector, who is nice to her, hoping for sexual favors. Jean comes to the store, in spite of Denise's forbidding it, to get money for one of his affairs. Denise barely has enough for P  p  's board, much less the things for herself that she badly needs. Jean manages to convince her to give him the money anyway, worsening Denise's constant worries about money.

Denise is in her room cleaning and repairing her things when Pauline knocks on her door. The girls exchange stories and complain about the other girls in the ladies' wear department, as well as Bourdoncle and Jouve. Pauline advises Denise to get a lover, but Denise rejects the idea. Pauline tells about her history and her current boyfriend. Pauline loans Denise the six francs she needs before sneaking back to her own room. As Denise becomes interested in the romantic life flourishing in and around Au Bonheur des Dame, she discovers that Colomban, her uncle's assistant, desires Clara, the scandalous sales clerk in her department. Denise develops a crush on Hutin.

In the spring, Denise finally gets a salary and can afford some things for herself. However, things are still difficult in her department and with the other sales clerks. Bourdoncle catches Albert kissing the girl from lingerie. This conflict brings the rivalry between lingerie and ladies' wear to a head. Everyone blames Denise because of her friendship with Pauline. To punish Denise, Madame Aur  lie invites all of the other ladies' wear employees to her country house. In response, Denise, Pauline and her boyfriend, Baug  , go together on an outing to Joinville. After lunch, they decide to stay in the country all day. They see Hutin in a rowing contest, and later he arrives at the restaurant with his showgirl. Hutin is trying to drink away and spend all of the money he made during the week. Denise, so affected by Hutin's apparent kindness in the store, is horrified at his behavior. Finally outside, Denise meets Deloche as Pauline and Baug   walk ahead. As they walk, Deloche reveals that he loves Denise, which makes her cry. She just wants to be friends with Deloche, and dejected, he starts to cry, too. They discover common histories and become friends.

Back in Paris, Denise goes back to Baug  's place with Pauline. Pauline undresses in front of Denise, preparing to spend the night there after bribing Madame Cabin, who is in charge of the sales girls' rooms, to let her stay out all night. Denise leaves embarrassed. When she returns to Au Bonheur des Dames, she goes into the shop instead of the apartments, thinking she hears someone. She makes her way through the dark shop, and runs into Mouret, who thinks she's been out with a man. He wonders not only how she will grow up, but also how he can corrupt her.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

The chapter opens and closes with Denise's encounters with Mouret. Neither of them understands the effect the other has on them. Mouret treats Denise like a child, but he senses that she will soon be a woman. He does not want to admit how much Denise affects him. Denise, too, senses her impending womanhood.

This chapter reveals the harsh conditions of working at a shop at the time. Many girls would have to leave the ladies' wear department, becoming ill from overwork. Denise's life is compared to an animal's in a zoo. Au Bonheur des Dames is her prison. However, Denise is patient, smiling, and gentle for two months. Her coworkers still reject her, tease her, conspire against her, secretly fear her, and only give her a few small sales, so that she is barely making enough money. Her heart is breaking with loneliness. Pauline tries to convince Denise that the only way she can survive is to get a man. Denise still says that way is not right for her. The thought of love in that environment is ridiculous with the competition and back-breaking work, though she has quite a crush on Hutin, feeling grateful at what are really only his salesman's smooth ways. When Deloche reveals his love, Denise cries because she knows that Pauline was right, and if it was Hutin instead of Deloche, she would cave in a heartbeat and let him take care of her.

This chapter provides several comments about the way a large department store affects the morals of its employees. The Lhomme family is one example. The three members of this family rarely see other, and are glad for it. Albert is drunk and entertaining three women when Denise and Pauline see him at the restaurant. The jokes about the Louvre having a midwife imply that every sales girl who works there ends up having a child.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The summer slow season brings mass layoffs to reduce costs in the store. Bourdoncle fires many and gives unpaid holidays to salesmen they want to keep. Denise fears being fired. When the department learns of her brothers, they assume Jean is Denise's lover, and Pépé is her child. When Denise confides in Robineau about what a hard time she is having making ends meet, he finds her some moonlighting work, which she stays up at night to do. However, the business goes bankrupt, leaving Denise unpaid for her work. When Jean needs money urgently, Denise looks for Robineau, hoping he can help her collect her wages.

The silk department employees are wishing that Robineau would not come back from his holiday, so that everyone can move up. Hutin and Favier go to the dining room for dinner, where another assistant asks whether they have solved their problem with Robineau. While they are dining, Mouret and Bourdoncle come down for a meeting to discuss the food quality. Mouret promises to make things better. Then Mouret and Bourdoncle meet with Bouthemont in the buyer's dining room to discuss Robineau. Mouret and Bourdoncle do not want to fire Robineau, because he is such a good salesman, but the issue of him finding outside work for salesgirls comes up and changes things. However, when Mouret finds out it is Denise, he makes excuses for her and only wants to reprimand them. Mouret and Bourdoncle leave to talk to Robineau.

Hutin and Favier tell Denise where to look for Robineau as they leave dinner. Denise plans to leave dinner last so that she can catch Robineau before returning to her department. While the ladies are finishing up their dinners, Jouve comes in, which encourages everyone but Denise to leave dinner early. Jouve invites Denise to his house, where she knows she is expected to grant sexual favors. When Jouve tries to kiss her, she resists with violence, pushing him so hard that wine splatters his tie.

While Denise is taking the long way to her department, looking for Robineau, she spots Jean looking for her. She leads him to the basement to chide him for his behavior. Jouve sees them, and they race away, hoping not to be recognized. Denise forgets about Robineau again. Jouve tells Bourdoncle, who decides not to consult Mouret. Madame Aurélie is reprimanding Denise for being gone so much lately when Bourdoncle and Jouve arrive. Bourdoncle fires Denise. Denise is worried that Mouret will believe the story about her and a man in the basement, but she ends up giving up and collecting her pay. She finally sees Robineau, who promises to help, but he ends up getting fired as well. Mouret finds out that Denise really was just trying to support her brothers, but Bourdoncle convinces him that everyone is better with Denise gone.



## Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter advances the plot and furthers the theme of the struggle for survival, showing how the big department store employers treat the employees. This aspect of the business leaves many sales clerks unemployed during the slow season. This chapter includes many more images of machinery.

Robineau's precarious position in the silk department provides more insight into the treatment of employees at Au Bonheur des Dames. He is an excellent salesman, so Mouret is reluctant to let him go. Bouthemont would rather keep things calm, and his salesmen (especially Hutin and Favier) are complaining about Robineau so much he recommends firing Robineau just to have peace in the department. The irony is that once this peace is gained, the salesmen target Bouthemont for their next attack. Mouret is swayed on Robineau by the rumors that he and the silk manufacturer have been talking about competing with Au Bonheur des Dames.

Pauline tells Denise that Jouve has expectations of the young ladies. This idea repulses Denise even more than the idea of getting a lover to keep her. Jouve makes advances on Denise when he finds her alone in the dining room. Because she reacts so violently, even ruining his tie, he is on the lookout for any misdemeanor to get her fired. He does not have to look hard, since Jean is there asking for money, and Denise tries to hide it instead of letting everyone see that it was just a respectable request from her brother. This chapter is also when Denise finally realizes that Hutin is no different from the rest of the sales staff. He teases her about Robineau, and she feels a sense of loss.

Bourdoncle reacts strongly when he learns of the sales-girls taking on extra work. He views this as just as bad as robbery, because the time and health of the sales staff does not belong to themselves, it belongs to Au Bonheur des Dames. Mouret views this practice with as much infuriation as Bourdoncle, feeling that it attacks the premise on which his shop is founded. However, he has a soft spot for Denise and does not want to fire her.

Denise's reputation is very important to her. When Bourdoncle fires her, she wants to know why. At the answer of meeting a man in the basement, she defends herself. She does not mind leaving, but wants to be sure that Mouret knows the truth about what happened. Deloche provides foreshadowing when he says, "'Oh, if only she could succeed somewhere else,' the young man said. 'Then I'd like her to come back here and trample all over them, these mediocrities!'" (Chapter 6, p. 176).



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Denise responds to her dismissal by wandering around in a daze. She keeps returning to Au Bonheur des Dames, and finally walks down her uncle's street. She sees the sign for a room for rent at the house of her uncle's friend, Bourras. Bourras thinks she is too respectable for his cheap rooms, but she convinces him to board her. She spends the next two months scraping by in terrible poverty and fear of the bold men in and around her building. She lives in the shadow of Au Bonheur des Dames and its employees. Colomban comes to see her to talk about Clara. When P  p   gets sick in the fall, Bourras brings bread, soup and a job offer for Denise. Denise accepts his charity while he invents work for her for the next few months. Bourras and Denise constantly talk about Au Bonheur des Dames, as Bourras rants about the cheap goods they sell and the attempts to squeeze him out of his house. Denise tells him to give in and accept the offer for his lease and stock, but he refuses. One day, Bourras gets the news that Mouret has bought the H  tel Duvillard. Mouret's renewed offer to buy out Bourras just makes him angry. Bourras makes repairs to the house, trying to win back customers. He tries to compete on price with Au Bonheur des Dames, and fails.

Deloche tells Denise that Robineau has bought Vin  ard's shop. She gets a job there with a small salary and meals. One night at dinner, Gaujean and Robineau are complaining about competition with the large manufacturers and stores. Denise finds herself arguing in favor of the large stores, in spite of how they treated her. Gaujean and Robineau plan their challenge to Au Bonheur des Dames based on a black silk. Robineau advertises in the newspaper and has an initial success with his lower prices. Then Au Bonheur des Dames lowers prices and the battle continues until both stores are selling silk at a loss. After Robineau adds a ready-made-clothing counter, Madame de Boves complains about the quality of the material in a coat. Robineau rudely reveals that he bought it from Au Bonheur des Dames. He loses customers over the story, and business slowly declines.

In July, Denise is out for a walk in the Tuileries gardens when she runs into Mouret. Mouret meets P  p   and apologizes for the mistaken misbehavior over which Denise was fired. Denise is happy to keep her reputation pure in his eyes. They talk about the battle between the small stores and his, and he warns her that she should return to Au Bonheur des Dames, because Robineau will not make it. Denise tells some of her ideas on the side of big business. When Denise arrives home, Bourras is mad because he has just gotten the news that his building has also sold to Mouret. Denise decides it is a good time to pass on Mouret's increased offer to Bourras, but it just makes him even madder. While raging, Baudu comes in to see if the rumor is true. He and Denise are finally reconciled, and he invites her and P  p   to dinner.





## Chapter 7 Analysis

The recurring theme of this chapter is resisting the urge to give in. Bourras' obstinate resistance to selling out to Mouret mirrors Denise's refusal to get a lover to take care of her. His refusal to take the fortune Mouret offers him is just like the fortune that Mouret offers Denise later. Neither Bourras nor Denise wants to be bought. Bourras also thinks that Denise looks too respectable to live in his house, where the ladies are all prostitutes. All the men that follow her know she must succumb to having a lover soon. In fact, Denise is embarrassed of what Mouret would think of her if he found out she was living there. The symbolism of Bourras' house falling apart foreshadows the deaths in the neighborhood.

Robineau's plans for competing with Au Bonheur des Dames provides a backdrop for the discussions about how the large stores are killing the small stores. Just as Bourras and Denise will not give in, Robineau also plans to resist the urge to give up. While at Robineau's, Denise begins to understand the new business form and its power for success and change in Paris. Vinçard arrives to show the reader how pleased he is to have gotten unburdened by his dying business. He tries to maintain the premise that he left because of his health, attributing his better health now to the better climate in the country.

The plot between Denise and Mouret advances when they meet in the gardens and take a walk together. Mouret treats Denise as an equal, as she shares her intelligent business ideas. Mouret knows where she is living and where she is working, and he wonders why she stays with his enemies.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

While Au Bonheur des Dames is expanding, and the Rue du Dix-Décembre road is under construction, Au Vieil Elbeuf is dreary and empty. When Denise and Pépé join the Baudu's for dinner, they talk about the large shop across the street, and Denise defends it. Baudu gets angry at the hopelessness of competing, but he hopes that when the road is finished, his business will increase. Baudu realizes that Denise is on the side of the big shop, and invites her to return to work there without it coming between them this time.

Colomban and Geneviève's marriage is postponed again because Baudu's pride will not allow him to pass on an almost bankrupt business to them. Madame Baudu guesses why her daughter is so sad. When Denise and Geneviève are alone, Geneviève breaks down, her hair coming undone in her grief. Denise pins it back again and loosens her cousin's dress, noticing how thin she is. Geneviève asks Denise if Colomban loves Clara. Denise tries to lie, but ends up telling the truth trying to prove that Colomban and Clara do not meet. Geneviève's heart is breaking because she has already thought of Colomban as her husband for ten years. Over the coming months, Denise visits Geneviève every day to try to cheer her.

Construction work on Au Bonheur des Dames continues, even at night. The growing departments squeeze out the neighborhood shops out one by one. Baudu keeps trying, but he finally has to sell his country house to the Lhommes. Madame Baudu asks her husband if he notices their daughter's health. Baudu decides to talk to Colomban. Baudu tells Colomban they need to keep postponing the wedding, which relieves Colomban. The assistant says nothing but finally agrees with his employer. Baudu reports to his wife that he is ready to take a final stand against Au Bonheur des Dames himself. Denise senses that Robineau needs to let her go, but does not know how, so she arranges to return to Au Bonheur des Dames. Bourras is fighting the attempts to build tunnels under his house. Denise gives him notice that she is moving out. He sees that she could not refuse such a great salary. Denise talks to Deloche. He tells her of Mouret's affair with Clara, which upsets her, though she does not know why.

Denise sees Colomban alone in the shop the next day. She confronts him about causing her cousin so much grief, but he is ignorant about his fiancée's health. He does not realize that Baudu had hoped Colomban would put up resistance to the delayed marriage. Denise finally tells Colomban the brutal details of Clara's sordid life. Colomban does not care, and he proclaims how much he loves Clara, just as Geneviève walks into the shop. Just then, Madame Bourdelais, one of the last faithful customers arrives. Baudu comes in and argues with her over prices. Baudu ends up insulting her, and she leaves for Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise tries to cheer the Baudus, but they feel Au Bonheur des Dames is stealing everything from them, even Denise. They look out with despair at the shop, construction nearly complete, as the



eight carriages working for Au Bonheur des Dames's dispatch office load up with an enormous amount of goods.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 focuses on the Baudu family, shop, and neighbors over the next several months. Vieil Elbeuf is shrinking as the competition across the street expands. Symbols of darkness and ruin foreshadow the upcoming events. Geneviève's hair falling over her face, covering her in blackness foreshadows the wasting girl's fate later in the novel. Baudu varies between despair, feeling it is useless to struggle against his competition, and an outrage at the changing business climate in Paris that propels him to continue.

This chapter discusses more about how the large stores are so successful. Robineau realizes that Denise is right about the big store. The continuous turnover of capital is the secret. This chapter also provides a commentary on the store's effect on families through the Lhomme family. Baudu envies their money, but does not want to give up what he has in family life to get it. The irony is that later, he loses his family by not changing his ways.

Madame Baudu knows why Geneviève is wasting away, but she will not talk about it with her husband. She also explains it to herself by suggesting that Geneviève inherited her weaknesses, and that growing up in a dark, stuffy shop does not make for good health. Baudu really wants Colomban to resist the postponement of the marriage and business take-over. His pride prevents him from passing on a near-bankruptcy, but he would give in with a word from Colomban.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

While getting ready for a big sale day, Mouret suddenly decides to rearrange the departments. Denise runs into him on her way to her department, and he invites her to his office after work. After the doors to the store open, the shopkeepers' and workers' wives come in to fight over the bargains, creating quite a crowd. Madame de Boves and her daughter Blanche see Madame Marty and her daughter Valentine outside the store. None of them had planned to go in, but they get swept in with the crowd. Madame Marty wants to buy a simple braid, but gets lost on her way to the haberdashery. The store's confusing layout and wonderful displays and salesmen trap them. Madame Marty begins her spending spree. Madame de Boves does not have any money, but she enjoys the store in her own way. They meet Madame Bourdelais, who has brought her children for some cheap entertainment.

In the reading room, Madame Bourdelais sees Madame Guibal. Madame Guibal claims to be returning something, but she is really waiting for a rendezvous with Monsieur de Boves. Monsieur de Boves arrives with Paul Vallagnosc, just as Mouret is passing the reading room on his tour of the store. As Paul and Mouret talk, Madame Desforges comes into the store. She buys silk from Bouthemont, who is now sometimes a guest at her Saturday teas. Bouthemont has mentioned Mouret's fling with Clara, without naming her, and Madame Desforges is determined to find out more. Denise passes through the silk department just as Madame Desforges is ready to go to ladies' wear, and escorts her back to her department. Mouret sees Denise with Madame Desforges. He distracts himself by talking with Paul about the problem of thieves. Madame Desforges notices the look that Mouret gives Denise and feels that Denise must be her rival.

In ladies' wear, Denise serves Madame Desforges, who is determined to make things difficult for her. Madame Marty arrives and tells Madame Desforges that the fling is actually with Clara. Madame Desforges rudely says that maybe Mouret is having both of them, which hurts Denise. Denise escorts her to another department, stopping along the way for Madame Marty's continued shopping spree. Once there, Madame Desforges changes her mind and wants to go back to ladies' wear. Monsieur de Boves and Vallagnosc go down to lace, where they run into Madame de Boves, who is supposed to be at home sick. When she sees Madame Guibal nearby, she regains her confidence, recognizing her husband's mistress. Jouve stops a pregnant woman he had been trying to catch as a thief. He realizes too late that her friend was the real thief. Madame Desforges leaves, hoping to find a way to humiliate Denise in her house.

Denise goes to Mouret's office. Mouret gives the open assistant buyer job to Denise. Denise is worried about seniority, but Mouret insists that she is the best choice. Lhomme comes in with the takings of the day, another record day of earnings. Mouret offers to let Denise take a handful of money. She starts to wonder if he loves her, but the



scene is interrupted when Bourdoncle arrives. Denise takes that opportunity to slip away.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The imagery of this chapter compares the expanded store with a church or a temple, designed to provide a place for lady customers to "worship." This temple is also the place of woman's greatest temptation, designed to part her with her money. Mouret believes that women are powerless to resist against his advertising schemes and low prices. Madame Marty and Madame de Boves prove he is right (at least with some women). Madame de Boves gives into the temptations offered at the store by stealing. She looks, and must touch, and she is trying to put some lace up her sleeve when her husband sees her in the store. Madame Marty becomes ill with her spending spree. The customers also provide a look at the theme of the blurring of class lines.

The expanded store is so big, it blocks the sun from the neighborhood, adding to the dark and dreary images symbolizing the death of the old ways. This chapter also contains several images of floods and rushing rivers, as well as battle images symbolizing the battle between new Paris and old Paris.

Mouret begins to desire Denise. Bourdoncle is worried about Denise's affect on Mouret. Paul also notices that Mouret has lost his touch a bit. Madame Desforges sees the effect Denise has on Mouret and is jealous. Denise understands some of Madame Desforges' motives in the way she treats her, wasting her time, and having her go from one department to another and back. Madame Desforges sizes up her assumed rival, foreshadowing the end of the novel when the relationship finally comes to pass.

Denise thinks first about what people will think when she becomes under-buyer. She assumes they will think she is having an affair with Mouret and he has given her the job in return. Mouret is falling in love with her. However, he treats her like an object to be purchased, which offends Denise. Denise will not be bought, just as she would not take a lover to help her through her tough times or become a prostitute. Denise feels so grateful to Mouret, that a friendly word would conquer her, and allow the love she is starting to feel for him flourish.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

August brings stock-taking day. Denise is recuperating from a sprained ankle when she gets a letter from Mouret. The letter is for an innocent dinner, but full of implications. Denise realizes she loves Mouret. Pauline comes into her room and Denise reveals the letter to her. Everyone thinks Denise and Mouret are already together. Denise cries, and Pauline advises her to go to the dinner. Pauline is marrying Baugé, which Denise believes is the proper thing to do when you love someone. Pauline lectures her further as Denise cries more. After Pauline leaves, Madame Aurélie comes to check on Denise. Denise insists on helping with the stock-taking.

As the employees work on the inventory, everyone is gossiping and talking about raises. Liénard, having overheard Pauline tell Deloche, has spread the gossip about Mouret inviting Denise to dinner. The employees are all gossiping about a fight between Favier and Deloche over Denise's reputation as well. Denise's crush on Hutin comes out. Favier goes to lunch where the men gossip more about Denise and Mouret, and Deloche throws wine in Favier's face. As Denise is going down to dinner, she sees Pauline and Baugé kissing as he is leaving dinner. Deloche tries to apologize to Denise for making things worse and reproaches Pauline for telling him about Denise's letter where someone else could hear. Denise forgives Pauline, now knowing why everyone is whispering about her.

Back in the ladies' wear department, Madame Aurélie takes Denise to the sample room to finish the paperwork. When Mouret comes by, Madame Aurélie finds a way to leave him alone with Denise. Denise tells Mouret she cannot come to dinner. When Mouret presses her, she finally says she just does not want to meet with him. Mouret tells Denise that he loves her. He offers to set her up, but she does not want to be bought. Mouret does not understand her refusal, and starts to become violent. She responds calmly and with dignity. Mouret leaves angry. Madame Aurélie wonders why Mouret is so angry when they have such a good inventory report, but everyone realizes that Denise has refused Mouret when she leaves early to go to dinner with her family.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter progresses the plot regarding the relationship between Mouret and Denise. Denise realizes that she never loved Hutin, but that from the first moment, she has always loved Mouret. Her feelings are conflicted because she loves Mouret, but she is not in his class, so she can only be his mistress. The relationship between Joseph and Madame de Fontenailles is another example of this cross-class love. Class is the main theme of this chapter, presenting the idea that the sales clerks represent a new class that is moving up in status.



The scene in the dining room shows the much improved life that the sales clerks enjoy from what it was when Denise first started at Au Bonheur des Dames. One of the ideas that Denise has shared with Mouret is that happier, better-fed employees would be more profitable for Mouret. However, this chapter includes more images of slavery or imprisonment as well.

Everyone believes that a man like Mouret can have more than one woman. However, Denise tells Pauline that she is not a woman to share. When Denise says a man should marry the woman he loves like Pauline and Baugé, Pauline replies that she and Baugé are equals, implying that Denise cannot marry Mouret because of their different social status. Denise thinks that Mouret should not pursue her at all, since she knows she can only be mistress to him, and she absolutely refuses to do that. Mouret is surprised, because none of the girls he picked up ever cared about him loving them. Denise has finally gotten respect in her department, but it is implied that Mouret is behind this. Madame Aurélie is Mouret's confidant, and she wants to do what he wants. And the other girls want to do what Madame Aurélie wants.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Madame Desforges is having another Saturday tea. Bouthemont now regularly comes. Madame Desforges is talking with him about her plan to get Denise and Mouret at her house together. However, the truth is that Mouret is spending tons of money on other women to get over his rejection from Denise. Bouthemont talks to Madame Desforges about the possibility of setting up another department store as competition to Au Bonheur des Dames.

Mouret arrives with Vallagnosc. Mouret tells Bouthemont that the store's management is angry with him. Denise arrives to help Madame Desforges with a coat. Madame Marty and Madame de Bovés arrive and talk about the coat. While Madame Desforges makes Denise wait, Baron Hartman arrives. Denise stands, waiting patiently in the antechamber. Finally, Mouret recognizes Denise from the other room, and gets uncomfortable, which Madame Desforges notices. Baron Hartman and Madame Marty talk about the reputation of shop girls. Mouret vehemently defends the shop girls' honor. Bouthemont points out that there are all sorts of girls. While the morals are improving, the shop clerks do make an indistinct class, lacking education, yet with dressing savvy and immersed in luxury. Bouthemont says this is the root of their vices. The ladies talk about jealousy and the expectation of the lower classes to be treated as superiors by the sales servants.

Madame Desforges finally goes out to Denise. Mouret and Baron go to the drawing room to discuss further expansion and women's revenge. Madame Desforges asks Mouret to come advise her on the coat. Denise helps Madame Desforges put on the coat. Madame Desforges orders Denise as she silently places the pins in the coat. Madame Desforges shows Denise that Mouret knows his way around her bedroom. Mouret tries to get the ordeal over with more quickly. Denise finishes, thinking this display was Mouret's idea as revenge for her refusal of him. Denise and Madame Desforges argue about her figure. Madame Desforges finally insults Denise and Mouret tells Denise to leave and forget the whole thing happened, reassuring her that Madame Desforges is the only one behind the insult. Madame Desforges realizes her trap backfired and that Mouret will leave her. Mouret tells her that he does love Denise. Mouret returns to Vallagnosc. They talk about Mouret's suffering and their opposite philosophies of life.

Mouret tells Bouthemont that the board has decided to fire him. When Madame Desforges finally comes in, cleaned up from crying, the ladies are talking about department stores again. Bouthemont talks again to Madame Desforges about setting up competition to Au Bonheur des Dames, this time more seriously since he has lost his job. Madame Desforges talks to Baron Hartman about backing him financially.





## Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter presents more on the theme of class. Bouthemont finds it strange that Madame Desforges confides so much in him compared to what his friends' mistresses would tell others. Madame Desforges tells Mouret that his store cannot dress distinguished women. However, Bouthemont points out that the lower prices are exactly why the distinguished ladies will not brag of wearing Au Bonheur des Dames' clothes. This chapter explains more about how the shop girls form a new, nameless class. Madame Desforges says all the salesgirls are for sale. The talk of the relationship between Madame de Fontenailles and Joseph points out the problem of cross-class relationships as well as the fall of the distinguished lady. Mouret's defense of Madame de Fontenailles foreshadows his own willingness to marry outside his class.

The secrecy in the affair between Monsieur de Boves and Madame Guibal contrasts to how Madame Desforges flaunts her affair with Mouret in front of Denise. Mouret is upset with Desforges for not concealing their affair from Denise, believing that not even a prostitute would be so familiar with a man in front of a stranger.

Mouret still wants to expand to take up the whole block and create an entrance on the new Rue du Dix Décembre. The Crédit Immobilier is still holding out against Mouret. Baron and Mouret talk about the store's increases in sales and turnover of capital. Baron supports Mouret instead of creating competition to the Grand Hôtel and plans to persuade the Crédit Immobilier. Baron teases Mouret about how women are getting their revenge on him, since he sees Mouret suffering. Mouret still does not understand the revenge. He thinks having to pay is enough. He does not realize that his suffering over Denise is payment for his past transgressions. Mouret tells Vallagnosc that simply having Denise is enough. It will end his obsession. Mouret's conversations with Vallagnosc solidify the feelings that his money cannot buy everything he wants.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Mouret gets Baron Hartman and the Crédit Immobilier to approve his expansion, but his triumph is empty. Clara decides to steal Colomban from his fiancée, which makes Denise angry. Denise realizes that her refusal of Mouret has given her power in the store, but she has no thoughts of marrying Mouret. Bourdoncle has Jouve looking for the slightest thing as reason to dismiss her. The store is still gossiping about Denise going with Hutin and Deloche. Mouret tours the entire store, feeling nothing but despair that Denise still says no to him.

One day, Bourdoncle tells Mouret about the gossip of Denise's lovers. Mouret starts firing people in his jealous rage. When an inspector finds Mignot, salesman in gloves, helping girls steal, Mouret loses his temper. Albert is also guilty. Mouret sees Favier lowering silk prices. Favier blames Hutin. Mouret yells at Hutin, who knows it is really about Denise. Deloche makes a habit of catching Denise on her way to the dressmaker's workshop. Hutin spies on him while Deloche is talking with Denise about their childhood homes and his continued love for her. Hutin sends for Bourdoncle, who sends Jouve to the construction site for Mouret. Just as Mouret arrives, Deloche kisses Denise's hand. Bourdoncle, Jouve, and Deloche all leave.

Mouret takes Denise to his office. In his jealousy, Mouret brings up all the rumors of her lovers, threatening to dismiss them. Denise wants to leave the store if he believes that she is that kind of a girl. Denise refuses to defend herself against his accusations. He tells her he loves her, begging her to stay. He reveals that he has given up all his other women. Denise stays calm and finally says that Deloche is as innocent as she. Mouret asks why she keeps rejecting him if she does not love anyone else. This embarrasses her, but Mouret does not realize that he is the one she loves. Denise agrees to stay if he believes in her good conduct. She leaves his office joking about making him a good man.

The next day, Denise becomes buyer in a new children's wear department, which brings her success, respect, and new friendships. In the new position, Denise and Mouret often chat. She tells him her business ideas. Denise sets up a staff orchestra and gets other improvements for the staff, like game rooms, classes, a library, and a doctor. Everyone agrees that her power over Mouret comes from her refusal of him. Denise intervenes with Pauline, who is threatened of dismissal because she is pregnant. Mouret instead gets a special midwife for married assistants. Denise visits Pauline in the new sick room. Pauline accuses Denise of manipulating Mouret to get him to marry her, but Denise protests. Denise says she will have to leave because of these new rumors. Mouret watches the final construction of his dream come to life. However, his wealth brings nothing but emptiness. Knowing money will not work on Denise, he starts to think about marrying her.



## Chapter 12 Analysis

Mouret thinks about how Denise has captivated him, especially since their walk together. He tries to convince himself to get over her, but he cannot. He does not understand her refusals of money or a higher position in the store, because he thinks she is ambitious. Denise's refusal makes him want her more. He is suffering with his obsession for her and disgusted by the empire he has built with no power to have her. His curiosity about how she would develop as a woman have turned into real love, as Mouret discovers that she has everything he wants in a woman. As he tours the store, he despairs that Denise still says no, and he finds his creation an insult since he has no power to convince her. The report of the day's takings at Lhomme's desk makes him hate money. He abuses his power, even though the power does nothing to satisfy his one desire.

The tour through the store provides a look at the improved conditions and expanded departments. Denise addresses the worst conditions of the store with her power, starting with the sudden dismissals. She convinces Mouret that it is in the owner's interest to take care of the employees. The orchestra makes many people happy (especially Lhomme), but it also provides some great publicity for the store. These changes, in addition to Denise's refusals of Mouret, are the revenge that Bourdoncle and Baron Hartman predicted.

Bourdoncle represents the thinking that married sales girls were no good anymore (such as in Pauline's case) and that working in a store would use up a woman by middle age (such as in Madame Aurélie's case). He is also sure that Denise will be the store's downfall, should Mouret give in to the temptation to marry her. His first instinct is to find grounds to fire her.

Denise reacts to Mouret's accusations with calm dignity. She chooses words his dead wife would have said when she assures him that women are usually respectable. She is simply without pretention or ambition, which makes her even more desirable to Mouret. When Pauline tells Denise that she could not have intended to get Mouret to marry her any more perfectly than the way she had acted, Denise is horrified. Denise does not think she wants that, but she has allowed her feelings for him to blossom, and in her mind, marriage is where love naturally leads. However, with the class issue, she is again upset, because she knows it is impossible. She is also worried about what everyone will think of her.

The scenes related to the thefts illustrate the weakness of a large store, and provide more insight on class in the way the management handles it. Madame Aurélie is a powerful, respectable woman, and having her son fired will cause gossip. Therefore, Arthur does not leave until two days later.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Geneviève sends for Denise, dying with grief that Colomban has left. The Baudus are not succeeding in their attempt to compete with Au Bonheur des Dames. Baudu blames himself for Colomban's departure. Denise tells him that Colomban would have found a way out, regardless of Baudu's actions. Geneviève asks Denise about Colomban and Clara. Denise tells her of his sad state, not even with Clara anymore and looking for another job. Geneviève has wasted away to the body of a child. She knows she is dying and tells Denise goodbye. Geneviève dies the next morning.

The neighborhood comes out for the funeral. After the service, the procession passes Au Bonheur des Dames again on the way to the cemetery. Bourras talks with Denise about the death of old trade and all the businesses going under, as well as the new departments at Au Bonheur des Dames. Bourras still maintains his fight against getting tunnels under his building or in letting Mouret buy out his lease. Denise calls him stubborn and urges him to give in. He says his struggle against being bought by Mouret is just like hers. At the burial, Bourras says they are burying the whole neighborhood. Mouret meets with Denise that evening, and the conversation comes around to the funeral. Mouret is very angry about Bourras preventing him from finishing his work. He has some sympathy for Denise's family, but he also says the misfortunes are their own fault for not changing their ways in these new times. She talks to Mouret about helping Baudu and Bourras.

One day Denise discovers Robineau with broken legs after an accident in Place Gaillon. Denise goes ahead of the crowd to warn Robineau's wife. Madame Robineau is pregnant and worried about their dire straits when Denise breaks the news of the accident to her. Robineau comes in on his stretcher, and confesses that he was trying to kill himself. Madame Robineau tries to console him about losing her money. The doctor finally arrives and says that the injury is a simple fracture and not serious. Gaujean comes in, as worried as Robineau, hoping to get back in the good graces of Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise tells him to see Mouret.

Madame Baudu dies in January. The funeral procession is a repeat of Geneviève's a few months before, with only a few victims of Au Bonheur des Dames's massacre of the neighborhood missing. Bourras is declared bankrupt and evicted. He watches as the demolition team takes down his house. Denise watches with him and begs him to take the offer of help. He refuses. Baudu sits in his shop alone for hours. Denise tells Baudu that Bourras' old house is gone. She asks what he will do, knowing the creditors have decided not to force him into bankruptcy. She offers a job as an inspector, but seeing how wrong it would be, she retracts the offer. Denise has trouble sleeping again, despairing at her own powerlessness in the struggle for survival.



## Chapter 13 Analysis

As Geneviève's hair consumes her face, so does the Au Bonheur des Dames consume its victims. Geneviève's death symbolizes the death of the old neighborhood and old ways of doing business. Many of the images in this chapter present the idea that some deaths are required for forward progress, as in a revolution. When the Vieil Elbeuf is covered in white for funeral, it contrasts the other images of darkness, elaborating on the idea that death is a necessary part of life.

The neighborhood victims of Au Bonheur des Dames who have had to go to work for other people bring up the theme of class again, as the shop owners go down in class when they work for someone else.

Denise finally understands the struggle for survival and accepts her place in that struggle. Denise has several dreams symbolizing the struggle for life. Denise knows about Mouret's affairs, exploitations, and deceit, but she feels that his continued suffering provides a means for purging all of his sins.

The windows symbolize life and death. Madame Baudu dies in January. Before she dies, she asks Baudu to open the windows, and she watches the monster across the street that devoured her family and her store. Denise closes the shutters when Robineau comes home injured to shut out the crowds, symbolizing the death of his store.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Au Bonheur des Dames is ready for its Great White Sale to celebrate the completion of the final expansion. Madame de Boves and Madame Guibal meet Madame Desforges, who has only come out of jealous curiosity about the rumors that Mouret will marry Denise. When the ladies go in, Inspector Jouve keeps his eyes on Madame de Boves. To escape the rumors, Denise has given her notice and is planning to leave after the sale for a month in Valgonnes. Bourdoncle finds Mouret in his office crying. Bourdoncle and Mouret go on their tour of the store during the sale. Jean and P  p   arrive to finish some purchases and exchanges for Jean's new wife before they leave with Denise the next day. Mouret comes by while Denise is mothering her brothers. He remembers seeing a much younger P  p   on their walk in the Tuileries gardens years ago. Mouret asks Denise to come to his office after the sale. As Denise goes around the store with her brothers, everyone treats her like a queen, asking her not to go, but still whispering about her and Mouret. Denise meets Mouret again without a word, but Madame Desforges sees them and they see her watching them.

In the lace department, Madame de Boves is having Deloche show her great quantities of expensive lace. Jouve is still watching her, and he catches her stealing. Jouve escorts Madame de Boves to Bourdoncle's office. She claims ignorance, putting on an arrogant show, but the men get some salesgirls to search her and find a fortune in stolen goods on her. Bourdoncle offers her a quiet solution to maintain her dignity and pride. At first, Madame de Boves refuses, but she finally signs the statement instead of facing prison. While Blanche is waiting outside the office for her mother, Vallagnosc, her new husband, finds her, and she tells him about her mother's stealing. Vallagnosc sees Mouret, who assures him that his officers will handle the matter discreetly. Vallagnosc still overreacts, but finally joins his mother-in-law, who again takes on her haughty manner.

Mouret watches his store devouring customers, and finally decides to let himself be defeated. He waits in his office. When Lhomme brings in the takings, which have finally surpassed the one million mark for one day, Mouret is indifferent to the money. Bourdoncle comes in, realizing what Mouret has decided and encourages him. Mouret recognizes that Bourdoncle wants to take advantage of his weakness, and puts him back in his place. Denise arrives. Mouret asks again if she will stay. He offers to marry her, and she still protests, afraid of what people will think of her. Mouret despairs and Denise finally admits she loves him and not someone else. Mouret lets her go to Valgonnes, planning to go there to marry her, so that she can come back as queen.



## Chapter 14 Analysis

As the store gets ready for its opening after the final expansion, the images of white everywhere and the choices in decorating symbolize the renewal in the midst of the death of the old neighborhood. It is also the foreshadowing of marriage between Denise and Mouret, the king and queen of the store. The temple symbolism expands on the concept that the store is a new type of religion for the customers, even comparing it to a golden calf.

Denise knows that she will not be happy if she gives in to her love for Mouret. The gossip in the store gives her considerable anxiety, and she knows the only way she can be happy is to leave. This chapter discusses a number of other characters who are getting married, such as Jean, the customer Madame Boutarel's daughter, and the ladies' wear sales clerk Marguerite.

Mouret thinks Denise is marrying someone else because she will not tell him the real reason for her leaving. He struggles against marrying her and forcing her. Mouret still feels that his power and money are useless, but he still struggles against the idea of marrying Denise, both for her class and another reason. He has a superstitious idea that he should remain a bachelor to stay successful. While Bourdoncle shares this superstition, he now wants Mouret to go ahead and get married so that Bourdoncle can take Mouret's place as director of the store. Mouret finally senses that he has finished with conquering women, so he finally gives in to marriage. However, he will not let Bourdoncle devour him.

Denise fears that everyone will think she is a whore, even if she marries Mouret. This problem is solved by her leaving for Valgones. There, Mouret can come for her, marry her on her turf and her terms, and she can return to the store as a true queen.



# Characters

## Octave Mouret

Mouret becomes the sole owner of Au Bonheur des Dames through luck after his wife dies. He feels gratitude to her for the good fortune she has brought him, but he is determined to consume the women of Paris, both as customers in his store, and as his mistresses. He is brutal in business, but understands the new commercial climate very well. Mouret predicts what will happen to the old trades, and feels no guilt about crushing the neighborhood businesses in his need to have his store take over the whole block as a beacon for the new Paris. Mouret believes he is a man of his time. He feels compelled to take action as the times call for progress and revolution. At first, he stakes his happiness on the success of his business. He is nervous that no one will come to his big sale, on which he has risked his future by renewing all his capital as additional goods. Mouret is also full of excitement for life, and a very hands-on manager.

Mouret likes being the benevolent prince in the store, letting Bourdoncle handle the reprimands and firings. He avoids conflict, such as when he talks with Robineau in his office, but then fires him with a letter later. He cares what his staff thinks of him. He also cares what Madame Desforges thinks of him.

Mouret is frantic when Denise does not immediately become his mistress. He is used to his power and money having an effect on people. He is used to getting what he wants. He knows, deep inside, that if she gives in and becomes his mistress, he will develop a contempt for her. Yet, he does not understand that more money does not change the issue. Denise is the first attachment that is not merely a pleasant pastime or a calculated move. As Denise continues to resist Mouret, he pays for his sins of using women with his suffering. He even feels guilty about using Madame Desforges, since he has her connection with Baron Hartman to thank for his success.

When Mouret realizes that he must marry Denise, he has to overcome his long-held perceptions of class. These ideas must die like the small businesses in the old neighborhood. He resists giving in to this change. When he finally decides to marry her, he considers it a huge folly, as if he is throwing everything away. At that point, he does not care about anything else anymore. However, by shedding those old perceptions and beliefs, he is able to progress to a better future.

## Denise

When Denise arrives in Paris, she is a young woman of 20 who has been in charge of her younger brothers since their parents' deaths a year ago. She has very long, luxurious hair, and looks impoverished in her old, tattered clothes. She has two years of experience as a salesgirl in a small shop in Valgones. She is enticed by all the activity and the amazing displays at the Au Bonheur des Dames. Denise is kind and gentle and





does not want to hurt her uncle's feelings, but she is also practical and must find a job and a place to live. She is humiliated by the store's immensity and the hostility of the other sales people, but she accepts her place in the social status as well as the requirements of her job.

While in her store uniform of silk, she holds back her sensitive nature, but back in her woolen dress in her tiny room, she lets the tears flow. This aspect is further explained as a tendency to have an initial rush of emotion followed by the strength to do what has to be done. She is practical and determined, putting up with solitude and imprisonment. Her ideas are based on common sense and decency. Her actions are guided by her gentle kindness as well as her good manners and polite nature.

She is both attracted to and afraid of Mouret at first. Denise cannot explain her feelings for Mouret. She knows that she loves him, and that gives her strength to resist being with him, because she instinctively knows that being his mistress will not make her happy. However, she is also simply afraid, being a young girl with no experience in love. Denise understands what Mouret is doing with his machine. He is opening the way to the new Paris, creating a revolution in business. This allows her to forgive his affect on her family and friends in the neighborhood.

Denise hates the big store, but defends it to her family and friends. She does not know what force takes her back there. Even in sight of her family being destroyed by the store, she does not feel that going back is wrong. By not making any demands, Denise affects positive changes in the store's environment for the workers through her common sense approach. She does not have any ideas of improving her status. She only lives by her values, which impel her to act in way that will bring long-term happiness.

## Pépé

Pépé is Denise's brother who is five years old when they arrive in Paris. He is a calm and compliant child who never causes her any trouble, except that Denise must make money to meet his needs. He is more beautiful than his sister, with his fair hair and childish features. He spends much of the novel boarding with Madame Gras.

## Jean

Jean is Denise's brother who is sixteen years old when they arrive in Paris. He is the reason they have come to Paris. He has shown talent in ivory carving and has gotten an apprenticeship. This apprenticeship provides him room and board, and does not cost Denise anything. However, Jean has also gotten into trouble with women already. He is constantly chasing after a new woman and thoughtlessly spends Denise's money on his women. As Denise's circumstances worsen, he stops asking for so much money. Eventually he grows up enough to stop needing it and earns his own income. At the end of the novel, he has gotten married, and Denise is helping his with a few last purchases before his honeymoon.



## Baudu

Denise's uncle left Valgonnes as a young man to become a junior assistant at the Vieil Elbeuf, which was a prosperous shop when he inherited it. He married the shop owner's daughter. Baudu is a proud, fat man stuck on the old ways of doing business, which is to make as much profit as possible out of every sale, though they may be few. He is reluctant to let Colomban, his assistant, marry his daughter, Geneviève, until the shop regains the prosperous condition in which he inherited it. He feels resentment at the Au Bonheur des Dames. He is angry and desperate, but he has not changed the displays or anything about his shop in all the time he has owned it.

When his continued struggle against the department store uses up all his money, he decides to sell his retirement home. This is hard for him, partly because he feels a grudge that a simple salesperson makes more at the department store than he does as a shop owner. This is another perspective on the class issue.

## Madame (Élisabeth) Baudu

Madame Baudu is an anemic-looking woman, old before her time. She has lived her whole life in the Au Vieil Elbeuf shop her father inherited from the original owner. Through bad luck and poor choices, Madame Baudu and her husband have lost almost all of their big family, and nearly everything else. She is so intertwined with the store that losing their business, as well as their daughter, kills her.

## Geneviève

Geneviève is the only daughter of Baudu and his wife. She has inherited her mother's sickly looks, but has an enormous amount of black hair that seems to have extracted all the passion out of her body. Depressed about Colomban's wandering eye, Geneviève seems to be causing her own illness, anorexia. She asks if she is fat, worried that Colomban does not want her for her looks. She tries to hide her thinness from her mother. Geneviève wastes away in the shop waiting for Colomban, a man she does not really even want, because everyone has always assumed they would marry. Baudu puts off the wedding several times. Geneviève completely wastes away and dies, providing the final blow to her parents and their failing shop.

## Colomban

Colomban is the industrious assistant at Au Vieil Elbeuf who has helped Baudu for ten years. He expects to take over the shop and marry the owner's daughter, as is done in a patriarchal shop. Since he has never had to win Geneviève, he is not that attracted to her. He has also inherited his father's weakness for womanizing, although in Colomban it is not as pronounced. He mainly spends his time looking at the salesgirls in the ladies' wear department at the Au Bonheur des Dames. Eventually, he does have a brief affair



with Clara, and takes to stalking her, which finally brings about Geneviève's destruction. This affair is actually his calculated attempt to get out of a marriage to a dying girl in a dying store.

## **Bourras**

Bourras is the next-door neighbor to the Au Bonheur des Dames. He has a long beard and an ancient look, looking like a prophet. He is attached to his building and way of life, though the building is in shambles and he is only a tenant. He intends to prevent Mouret from obtaining his building during the years he still has on his lease of the building. His tenants are of questionable repute.

Bourras is a craftsman and an artist, creating beautiful umbrella handles, but he cannot compete with his neighbor's economies of scale. He has a brusque manner with a harsh voice, but he helps Denise out of charity because he cannot let anyone die of poverty in his house. He is the type that the neighborhood parents use to threaten their misbehaving children.

Bourras will not give in at any price. He even uses all his money to fight the attempt to get tunnels under his building. Bourras compares his struggle against Mouret to Denise's struggle to maintain her pure reputation. He cannot be bought. However, his struggle is useless. He loses his house anyway, and has nothing left when he leaves the demolished building from which he has been evicted.

## **Vinçard**

Vinçard is the silk shop owner that Baudu hopes can provide Denise with a job. Vinçard, however, is trying to sell his shop. He says it is because of his rheumatism, but in reality, he sees the writing on the wall with Au Bonheur des Dames. He knows he is not up to the competition and does not want to be ruined along with his neighbors. After selling his business to Robineau, he starts a restaurant in Vincennes, happy to have gotten out of the silk business just in time.

## **Madame (Henriette) Desforges**

Henriette Desforges is a widow and Mouret's lover, though she is sensible about the liason and never allows any scandal. She recognizes that Mouret is just using her to get to Baron Hartmann, but she loves him so much that she plans to find a way to keep him. Madame Desforges represents the bourgeoisie in the commentary on class in the novel. She is the high society character who brings together the characters outside the store. She is also the sophisticated shopper who only buys a few things at Au Bonheur des Dames, and would never admit to wearing their clothes.

Madame Desforges grows desperate to keep Mouret. Her jealousy brings her to the store, where she is trapped into buying things just like the other customers. She treats



Denise like a servant to avenge her jealousy, but Denise is patient and submits to her job. She treats Denise terribly at her house, making her wait, and then ordering her like a slave, insisting on her superiority. She wants to catch Mouret in this affair, but because Denise's actions are reputable, there is nothing to catch. Madame Desforges reveals her affair with Mouret by being too familiar with him in front of Denise, which angers Mouret and goes against her usual discretion. When Madame Desforges realizes she has pushed things too far, she is devastated.

## **Madame (Caroline) Hédoin**

Madame Hédoin is the daughter of a small shop owner of Au Bonheur des Dames before Mouret takes over. A widow and part owner of the shop, she marries Mouret and reluctantly allows him to make changes and expand. She falls at the building site and dies, eventually leaving Mouret the sole owner of the shop. The luck of the big department store is rumored to be the result of Madame Hédoin's blood in the foundation.

## **Baron Hartmann**

Baron Hartmann is the director of the Crédit Immobilier. The liaison he developed with Madame Desforges while her husband was still alive continues in the present time of the novel as more of a paternal influence. Mouret needs Baron on his side to realize his plans of expanding Au Bonheur des Dames to take up an entire block. Baron is not sure Mouret's plans for expansion will work. As he watches the ladies at Madame Desforges' house, however, he becomes convinced. Baron invests in Au Bonheur des Dames, and the investment is quite profitable for him, convincing him to pressure the Crédit Immobilier to allow Mouret to expand into the whole block.

Madame Desforges presents another investment opportunity when Bouthemont wants to open a competing store. Baron Hartman agrees to have money invested in competing stores.

## **Monsieur (Paul) de Vallagnosc**

Paul de Vallagnosc is an old school friend of Mouret's who has taken a different path since school. After obtaining his baccalaureate, he eventually takes a junior post at the Ministry of the Interior, not making much money. He is bored and disgusted with life. He is planning to marry Blanche de Boves, but only because he admires her father. Vallagnosc thinks life is pointless and stupid, and provides a contrast to Mouret's excitement and passion for life. Vallagnosc provides more commentary on the class issue when his mother-in-law is caught for stealing.



## Robineau

Robineau is the assistant buyer in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. Robineau is resentful toward Au Bonheur des Dames because instead of him getting the promotion to buyer he was promised, an outsider gets the job. He feels sorry for Denise and helps her get the job at Au Bonheur des Dames. Later he helps her get extra work when he sees what poverty she lives in working at the large store. Vinçard is trying to convince him to purchase his silk shop. The money belongs to his wife. He thinks that because he is young, and Gaujean is giving him generous credit terms, he can succeed against Au Bonheur des Dames. He accepts the new ways of doing things, but does not have the power to affect real change. He tries to kill himself, feeling bad about losing his wife's money, and facing bankruptcy. The accident only breaks his leg.

## Madame Aurélie

Madame Aurélie is the buyer in the ladies' wear department at Au Bonheur des Dames. She is a very successful sales woman, and this gives her tremendous power in the store, which she uses to get jobs for her family and friends. She represents the extreme of the new way of doing things, by refusing to be called by her last name. Her family is only loosely connected to one another, providing commentary on the broken families created by the department store. Madame Aurélie's friendship with Mouret also gives her power, which influences the fact way Denise is treated.

## Bourdoncle

Bourdoncle started at Au Bonheur des Dames as a small neighborhood shop at the same time as Mouret. He has always deferred to Mouret, sensing the power that Mouret has, but ready to take over when the time comes. Bourdoncle is serious-minded and prudent. He has invested his money in the store, eventually becoming one of the principal investors. This makes him concerned with the profits and bottom line of the business in all his dealings. He pretends to hate women, but he really just wants to exploit them as customers. Concerned with the success of the business, Bourdoncle fears Denise's effect on Mouret. He thinks she is the revenge that all women will take on Mouret for their exploitation through the store. He eventually accepts Denise, because he sees the opportunity to attack and replace Mouret.

## Bouthemont

Bouthemont is the buyer in the silk department. Hutin recommended him from outside the store to prevent Robineau from getting promoted. Bouthemont is not a good salesman, but he is an excellent buyer, so he gets a free hand in running the department. He is motivated by a commission on an increased turnover of goods, rather than actual sales. Bouthemont is affected by the turbulence in his department that



results from the competition. This leads to Robineau's dismissal, and eventually to his own dismissal.

Bouthemont becomes a confidant to both Mouret and Madame Desforges as a sort of buffer in the dying relationship. He uses the friendship with Madame Desforges the same way Mouret did, as a way to get financial backing from Baron Hartman. When Bouthemont finally loses his job as buyer, he is quick to develop a competing store. He uses the same tactics as Mouret, to an even greater extent to gain business. The fact that his business is lost to a big fire only serves as greater publicity for when the store eventually reopens.

## Lhomme

Lhomme is Madame Aurélie's husband. She recommends him for his job as cash desk manager, where he makes a fixed salary of less than his wife. He has lost an arm under an omnibus, but still manages to play the horn with a system of clamps. He loves music and spends all his free time playing or listening to music instead of spending time with his family. When Denise gets Mouret to make changes in the store, the orchestra becomes his pet project.

## Albert Lhomme

Albert is Madame Aurélie's son, whom she recommends for a cash desk job. He is not good at his job, making mistakes and spending too much attention to women customers and sales clerks. He spends his money gambling, drinking, and on loose women. He is friends with Mignot, and eventually loses his job sending his women to Mignot's department to steal.

## Hutin

Hutin is the top salesman in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. He wants Robineau's job, so he recommends Bouthemont as buyer so that Robineau will not get promoted. Hutin hopes to drive Robineau out. Hutin is the epitome of the competition that Mouret promotes in the store. Hutin does any and everything possible to get his percentage and commission. Hutin's irritation and impatience at spending time on customers who are not buying anything undermines his sole obsession on his commission. Hutin puts on his salesman charm for Denise, seeming like the only friend she has, although nothing could be further from his mind. When he finds out later that Denise has a crush on him, he is secretly flattered, but openly boasts that they had already slept together.

Hutin acts like he despises young girls in favor of his boasted affairs with his rich customers, although the reality is that he picks up girls in bars and music halls. He spends his money as fast as he can get it, never thinking about the future. When he finally gets the promotion, he becomes unbearable in the department, instead of being



the friendly manager he promised to be. As buyer, his department undermines him even more, since that is part of the machine that Mouret has created. Hutin talks with Madame Desforges about getting a job at Bouthemont's new store because he predicts that the department will drive him out, too.

When Mouret blows up at Hutin near the end of the novel, Hutin knows that the rumors about him and Denise are the real reason for the explosion.

## **Favier**

Favier is a salesman in the silk department of Au Bonheur des Dames who comes from family of weavers. He is friendly with Hutin, but covets his friend's job as top salesman, and later as under-buyer, then buyer.

## **Clara Prunaire**

Clara is the tall red-head in the ladies' wear department. She has several gentlemen friends and many more occasional lovers. She only works in the shop as a cover, as she lives in fear from her father who beats her. Clara's affair with Mouret and her decision to steal Colomban away from his fiancée are important points in the plot.

Clara makes a statement about class when talking about Mademoiselle de Fontenailles and Joseph. However, Clara is envious of the love Mademoiselle de Fontenailles has for Joseph. Clara, in contrast, is only using her men and extracting her revenge on them for the way her father treated her.

## **Marguerite Vadon**

Marguerite is the ladies' wear department sales girl who came to Paris to hush up her illegitimate child. She supports Denise in the possible relationship between Denise and Mouret when she comments on how much trouble one can get into by not being sensible. Marguerite is the sales clerk most jealous and bitter about rubbing shoulders with society and not being a part of it.

## **Madame Frédéric**

Madame Frédéric is the under-buyer in the ladies' wear department. She leads a secretive life, providing speculative gossip in her department. She leaves the job suddenly, providing a position to allow Mouret to promote Denise.



## Mademoiselle (Pauline) Cugnot

Pauline Cugnot is a salesgirl in the lingerie department who is kind to Denise at the beginning, remembering what a hard time she herself had the first few months on the job. Her parents are millers in Chartres. When Denise resists Mouret, Pauline thinks she is throwing away a fortune. The irony is that Denise ensures a true fortune by not allowing herself to be bought for a temporary fling. Pauline allows herself to be degraded by taking lovers who help her make ends meet. She leads a happy enough life. She marries her lover and they have a child. Denise intervenes to keep Pauline at the store even after having a baby.

## Baugé

Baugé is the tall boy in the linen department who is Pauline's boyfriend. His family runs a grocery store, but they shut Baugé out, thinking that he is too dumb to help with the business. Pauline sometimes makes fun of him, but seems happy with him. After he and Pauline marry, Baugé treats Denise (now buyer) as if she is upper class.

## Henri Deloche

Deloche applies for a job at Au Bonheur des Dames at the same time as Denise. As the lowest salesman in the lace department, he only earns commissions, and he sleeps in the store at night. He falls in love with Denise from afar, and after revealing his love, which is not returned, he becomes friends with Denise. Deloche defends Denise against the gossip and rumors about her and Mouret, but his defense ends up doing more harm than good.

## Madame Cabin

Madame Cabin is in charge of the women employees' rooms at Au Bonheur des Dames. The girls learn that they can bribe her to look the other way while they stay out all night with their lovers.

## Joseph

Joseph is the porter who works at Albert's cash desk delivering purchases to the dispatch department. He is Albert's foster-brother. He represents the working class, and instigates a scandal among some of the characters with his relationship with Mademoiselle de Fontenailles.

## Campion

Campion is the head of the dispatch dept and a retired sergeant.





## Mademoiselle de Fontenailles

Mademoiselle de Fontenailles is a 28 year old aristocratic woman from a ruined family. She does not have enough education to get a respectable job, so Madame Desforges asks Mouret to find her a job at the store. Mademoiselle de Fontenailles' relationship with the porter Joseph causes a fuss among some of the characters. She represents the aristocracy in the class theme of the novel.

## Gaujean

Gaujean is a silk manufacturer who thinks the large stores will put the French silk industry out of business. He encourages Robineau to buy Vinçard's shop and extends him very generous credit terms, in hopes he will succeed and force Au Bonheur des Dames to have better terms for the manufacturers.

## Madame Sauveur

Madame Sauveur is a fashionable, expensive dressmaker. Mouret reveals that she buys materials at Au Bonheur des Dames.

## Madame Bourdelais

Madame Bourdelais is a practical housewife with three children: Madeleine, Edmond, and Luci n. She is married to a deputy head at the department at the Ministry of Finance. She is skilled at finding bargains. Madame Bourdelais is the shopper least likely to fall to temptation, but when the store gets to her through her children, even she succumbs.

## Madame Guibal

Madame Guibal is the shopper who is primarily a window shopper, until Mouret invents the advertising gimmick of returns. Madame Guibal abuses the system, buying curtains for a party and then returning them. Her husband enjoys free living, which allows her to have her own lovers. She has a harsh ego and is sensible about her own affairs, making sure to maintain her respectability. Monsieur de Boves pursues her at Madame Desforges teas, but Madame Guibal hangs on to the affair. She keeps it secret by meeting in public places like the reading room of Au Bonheur des Dames until Monsieur de Boves becomes ill and his mistress and wife decide to come to open terms with each other.



## Madame de Boves

Madame de Boves is the beautiful Countess who is married to the general inspector of the Stud. Her husband, who has many affairs (including Madame Guibal) does not give her pocket money. She looks through the store at every sale, consumed with passion for the fine things she cannot buy. This temptation turns into a neurosis when she starts to steal. She takes advantage of Deloche, the worst salesman, by having him show her lots of expensive lace. When her husband becomes ill and she and his mistress have to get along, she starts getting more money from her husband. However, she steals with money in her pocket, because it has become a type of thrill-seeking for her. The management helps her stay respectable when they catch her stealing, and she retains her haughty attitude.

## Blanche de Boves

Blanch is the 21 year-old daughter of Madame de Boves who is set to marry Paul Vallagnosc. She has many of her mother's traits, from her physical build to her haughty society attitude.

## Madame Marty

Madame Marty is an ageless but ugly woman who feels compelled to wear the prettiest and latest fashions. She is the middle-class woman who finds a better life through marked prices, but she has no control over herself while shopping. She gets carried away, despite the fact that her husband can barely make enough money in extra work to keep them afloat. She has good intentions, but cannot resist the temptations in the store. Succumbing to this temptation makes Madame Marty ill. Her spending addiction makes things difficult at her husband's job, because of the type of extra work he is doing. She feels bad about this, but she still cannot stop herself.

## Valentine Marty

Valentine is Madame Marty's 14 year old daughter. She is used to dressing as nicely as her mother. She provokes her mother to get nicer things than she can really afford.

## Madame Boutarel

Madame Boutarel is a provincial shopper who comes to Paris to shop occasionally. All the sales people know her, with a reputation for saving her pennies for months and spending it all when she comes to Paris. She might have been Denise's first sale, but Madame Aurélie does not want a regular customer to be served by the beginner.



## Liénard

Liénard is the son of a rich draper in the provinces and a salesman in the silk department at Au Bonheur des Dames. Since he lives off his father, he is not a very motivated salesman. He hates to work, but living in fear of being called home, he does just enough work to keep from being fired.

## Mignot

Mignot is a successful salesman in the glove department at Au Bonheur des Dames. He constantly complains about the food in the dining room. He becomes good friends with Albert, drinking, gambling, and wasting money on women with his friend. Albert sends him women to get bargains. When the women start stealing, Mignot ends up helping them, because he is already too compromised to tell the management. Mouret fires him in his power rage when he finds out.

## Jouve

Jouve is the former army captain who has become inspector at the store. He is a handsome older man who invites the sales girls to his house, expecting sexual favors from them. In return, he helps them keep their jobs. When Denise violently refuses him, he immediately searches for a reason to fire her, and since Jean comes into the store that day needing money, Jouve does not have to look far. Jouve knows which kind of customer is more likely to steal, and follows pregnant women especially.



## Objects/Places

### Au Bonheur des Dames

Au Bonheur des Dames is the small shop, which with Mouret's luck and business sense, grows to a giant department store that covers an entire city block. The store grows so large, it is like a small, self-contained city that includes not only the dozens of departments, but various other aspects of commodities, as well as living and dining spaces for the employees.

### Neighborhood Shops

There are several neighborhood shops in addition to those owned by Baudu, Bourras, and Robineau. Mademoiselle Tatin has a lingerie shop. Quinette is a glove-maker. Vanpouille are furriers. Bèdorè and Sister are hosiers. Deslignières is a fancy-goods dealer. Piot & Rivoire are furniture dealers. All of these neighborhood shops are bankrupt or nearly so by the growing beast of Au Bonheur des Dames.

### Cornailles

Cornailles is the top ladies' wear shop in Valgonnes, where Denise worked for two years before moving to Paris.

### Valgonnes

Valgonnes is the province from which Denise comes. It is very close to where Deloche has grown up as well.

### Au Vieil Elbeuf

Au Vieil Elbeuf is the flannel shop that Baudu owns. The original owner passes it to his top assistant, who also marries the owner's daughter. Baudu marries the second owner's daughter and inherits the shop as well. When Baudu becomes owner, the shop is very prosperous, but because of competition from Au Bonheur des Dames, he loses more business every year. Baudu does not want to pass the shop on to his assistant until it is doing well again.

### Paris-Bonheur

The Paris-Bonheur is a faille with a blue and silver selvage. Mouret obtains exclusive rights to the silk, then sells it at barely above cost to lure customers.



## Baccalauréat

Mouret and Vallagnosc discuss the uselessness of the baccalaureate. Mouret only took his to please his parents. He recognizes that it opens doors for a young man, but he argues that those doors are not worth opening. He compares the job that Vallagnosc got with his, to the type of money that some of his sales staff makes without the degree.

## Place Gaillon

Place Gaillon is the fountain square just outside Au Bonheur des Dames.

## Vans

Near the beginning of the novel, Mouret launches four vans to work for the dispatch office making deliveries. The green vans are polished and show the name of the shop on each side, with an advertisement for the sale. As the store grows, the number of carriages also expands, much to the displeasure of the other neighborhood shops.

## Bourras' House

Bourras lives in the house next door to Au Bonheur des Dames. The house is so old and in such poor repair, that it only seems to be staying up with the support of the surrounding buildings. Bourras has an umbrella shop and subleases the upper floors to tenants of questionable repute. As part of Bourras' attempt to compete with Au Bonheur des Dames, he makes repairs to the house, but in the end, the repairs are useless against the deterioration of the house.

## Hôtel Duvillard

The Hôtel Duvillard is the old hotel next to Bourras' house. When Mouret buys it, Bourras truly begins to feel the squeeze from Au Bonheur des Dames.

## Rue du Dix-Décembre

The Rue du Dix-Décembre is the new wide boulevard in the neighborhood. It opens up the old neighborhood to the new Paris, and provides a perfect opportunity for Mouret to expand Au Bonheur des Dames.

## Vinçard's/Robineau's shop

Vinçard owns a silk shop in the old neighborhood and, feeling the pressure from Au Bonheur des Dames, wants to get out. He sells to Robineau.



## **Bobbin Club**

The Bobbin Club is a club of the cotton-reelers, which meets at a wine merchant on Saturdays. The Au Bonheur des Dames salesmen have respect for this club, which is a symbol of the increased status of sales clerks.

## **Joinville**

Denise, Pauline, and Baugé take a Sunday trip to the suburbs in Joinville to enjoy the country air. They run into Hutin, who is trying to spend all his money from the week, Albert, who is consorting with more than one woman, and Deloche, who has walked there to save money.



# Themes

## Survival of the Fittest

This novel repeatedly presents the Darwinian idea that only the strongest survive. As Au Bonheur des Dames grows and becomes more and more successful, the neighborhood shops are driven out of business one by one. On several different occasions during the novel, Mouret explains why his department store is so successful, while the old-style trade shops refuse to change their ways to keep up with the times. In not being willing (or able) to change, the old shops prove to be weaker and therefore not able to survive in the new Paris.

The concept of survival of the fittest is also demonstrated on a different level in the silk department of the store. At first, Hutin undermines Robineau, even getting Bouthemont hired for the buyer position from the outside to prevent Robineau's promotion. Hutin wants Robineau's job. Once Hutin is under-buyer, he starts attacking Bouthemont to gain the buyer's position. When he is buyer, the whole process is now turned against him as Favier works to undermine him. Mouret is convinced that this competition is one of the secrets of his success, allowing only the best salesmen to remain in the department.

Denise presents this theme in a more personal context. As a tattered and somewhat timid salesgirl at first, she becomes the weakest sales clerk in the ladies' wear department. She therefore loses her job when it is time to make staff reductions. However, Denise has strength of character that no one else in the novel can match. She retains her dignity and honor in spite of terrible poverty. This strength of character allows her to survive, return to Au Bonheur des Dames, and quickly rise not only to a buyer's position, but the generally accepted "queen" of the shop.

## Blurring of Class Lines

A major theme of *The Ladies' Delight* is the effect that the large department stores have on the long-accepted social structure. The first aspect of this is the new, indistinct class the sales girls make. The girls come in close contact with women from the middle and distinguished classes, and in response to this close contact, adopt speech, mannerisms, and dress of women from higher social classes. The girls in the ladies' wear department wear silk, a sign of a more distinguished social class than their individual origins. This is a source of competition between the ladies' wear department, and the lingerie department, who must wear woolen dresses for their uniforms. On the other hand, the morals of the sales girls are generally considered loose or questionable. Since no one believes that a woman can earn a living on her work, most of the sales girls take lovers to make additional money (either directly by being prostitutes, or indirectly, to get their lovers to buy them things or pay for their keep). The sales girls



also have little or no education, which is an important distinction between them and society women.

Another perspective of the department store's affect on social status structure is the customers. The department store, especially with marked and lowered prices, provides goods to lower and middle-class women that they had not previously been able to obtain. One of Mouret's ideas, having marked prices, especially affects middle-class ladies like Madame Marty. She feels that she is getting a bargain, and wanting to be like and impress society women like Madame Desforges, she spends uncontrollably. Her spending eventually ruins her husband. Another notable side of increasing the status of lower and middle-class women is the attitudes they adopt in the store, expecting the sales clerks to be servants to them. Hutin illustrates this point when he says, "Forget it! She's a trollop. Who can tell nowadays with the distinguished airs they put on!" (Chapter 4, p. 96).

Mademoiselle de Fontenailles presents another way class lines are blurred in this novel. She is an aristocratic woman whose fallen family did not provide her with enough education to get a proper line of work for a woman in her position. Madame Desforges is appalled at the type of work her protégée has to do in the store, although she had asked Mouret to find her a job in the first place. What outrages Madame Desforges even more is the eventual marriage between Mademoiselle de Fontenailles and Joseph, a common working man who is a porter in the store. Lying underneath this outrage, however, is the truth that working in the store provides a woman in these circumstances with a much better life than she would have on the streets, since she does not have to pay for a place to live, food to eat, or even clothes since she has a uniform to wear.

The main conflict in the novel involving class is the relationship between Mouret and Denise. Mouret simply cannot marry one of his sales clerks, women basically picked up off the streets. He cannot lower his social status that way, and everyone, both clerks in the store, and society gathered at Madame Desforges', agrees on that. Denise knows that Mouret cannot marry her. His first attempt at a date with her offends her so much because she knows the only thing she can be to him is a mistress. Mouret struggles against this long-held perception about how his class can behave, until he finally gives in to the idea of marrying her. When he accepts the idea of marrying Denise, he considers it folly, but he has gotten to the point that he will take that risk to have her.

## Giving In

Many characters in *The Ladies' Delight* resist the forces around them. Baudu does not give up in the face of brutal competition from the department store across the street. This resistance eventually destroys his family. Bourras refuses to give his house and business to the department store, even when Mouret offers him a fortune. Bourras often compares his resistance to letting Mouret have his house to Denise's resistance to letting Mouret have her virtue. However, Bourras gains nothing by resisting. Denise gains everything by resisting. She retains her honor and dignity, and acquires power in





the store to really change things for the sales clerks and improve their lives. She becomes queen and ends up getting Mouret on her terms.

Other characters take a different path. Pauline, for example, gives in to the need to have a man take care of her. She has nothing to regret and ends up happily married to one of her lovers. However, Denise knows that Pauline's path is not for her. Colomban also gives in easily. Baudu wants him to resist postponing his marriage, but Colomban uses that resistance as a way to get out of dying in that shop with a girl he does not love. Finally, some of the customers show weakness. Madame Marty goes into the store for a braid, or just out of curiosity, but ends up purchasing so much it makes her ill. Madame Bourdelais goes in to entertain her children. She, too, gives into the advertising and temptations in the store. Even Madame Desforges, who goes to the store to find out if the rumors about Mouret and Denise are true and determined not to buy anything, finds she cannot leave the store without a trinket.

# Style

## Point of View

Zola adopts a third-person omniscient point of view to tell this story. The narrator is reliable and unobtrusive. When appropriate, the narrator provides insight into the characters' thoughts and emotions. This is especially important for showing the internal struggle that Mouret feels about marrying beneath his class. It is also important in highlighting some of the other themes, such as Hutin's motives in the silk department, or to show Madame Desforges' jealousy. At other times, the characters present their ideas directly in dialog. For example, Mouret and Baron Hartman have conversations about the new business climate that are persuasively presented in dialog in a way that exposition could not have achieved.

The point of view sometimes focuses on Denise and her struggle to survive. Sometimes the point of view focuses on Mouret, providing detailed information on his character, his business ideas, and his own struggle. Some chapters focus on Baudu or Bourras to show the neighborhood perspective. When the focus shifts to Madame Marty, the reader gains more insight on the middle-class perspective. Scenes that focus on Madame Desforges show the society perspective. Using an omniscient point of view that includes a focus on many different characters presents a comprehensive look at the effect that Au Bonheur des Dames has on the neighborhood.

## Setting

The Ladies' Delight is set in Paris in the 1870s. It is a Paris that is becoming more modern, which requires clearing out buildings (like Bourras' house) and practices (the paternal businesses) that have been in place for 200 years. The expanding Au Bonheur des Dames and the new road Rue du Dix-Décembre represent the new, modern Paris that emerges from the ashes of the old neighborhood.

Denise's struggle takes place in several settings, including the ladies' wear department at Au Bonheur des Dames and her tiny room when she first arrives, as well as her better rooms as life improves. Baudu's dining room and shop and Bourras' house are dark, dying places that contrast with the shining brightness of the department store and space created with the new road. Even Robineau's shop is small and dim, representing the death of the old ways taking place there.

Zola spends considerable effort describing the entire department store, from the receiving area and dispatch, to the mail room and counting house, and the departments themselves. Mouret takes a tour of the store early in the novel, and another tour near the end of the novel. This contrast shows how things have improved as Au Bonheur des Dames grows and Denise's influence and ideas are implemented. This improvement is especially apparent in the dining room scenes.



Other scenes are at Madame Desforges house, a wealthy aristocratic home. Her house is the setting for philosophical talks between Mouret and Vallagnosc, and business talks between Mouret and Baron Hartman. Another scene outside the neighborhood is when Denise accompanies Pauline and Baugé to Joinville. This country setting allows Denise to see Hutin outside of his slick, salesman setting. Similarly, a walk in the gardens allows Mouret and Denise to have a friendly conversation away from work and the pressures and influences of the other store employees.

## Language and Meaning

The Ladies' Delight uses language appropriate for the times. It uses language and sentence structure one would expect for a novel published in the 1880s. The conventional language and rich vocabulary seem more formal by today's standards, but are fitting for a story set in the late nineteenth century. Even though the language and dialogue are sophisticated, the novel is easy to follow. Some French phrases evoke the context of the novel, set in Paris. The names of the stores are italicized and remain in the original French. Names of streets and characters also retain the original French, but are not italicized. Some of these names may seem unfamiliar to a reader without a background in French, but a familiarity with French is not required to enjoy the story. Many words use alternative spellings.

The meaning and imagery of the novel are very straightforward. The main image describes the department store as a machine. Zola also presents the department store as a church or temple. Some of the openings to the chapters include extensive description to elaborate on these images. These images provide a commentary on the effect of the large department store on Paris at the time. These comparisons of the department store to an unfeeling machine designed for supporting consumption, or as a tabernacle to a new kind of worship still apply today. At times, the straightforward nature of the language glazes over the passage of time in the plot. It is sometimes difficult to tell how much time has passed since the last chapter or scene.

## Structure

The novel is divided into fourteen approximately equal chapters averaging thirty pages each. Some chapters focus on Denise's struggle for survival. Some chapters focus on the neighborhood's struggle (and failure) for survival. Chapters set at Madame Desforges' house focus on society and provide a place for Mouret to describe his business philosophy. Likewise, Denise defends the large store business philosophy in the chapters set in Baudu's or at Robineau's dining table. Some chapters show the conditions in the department store, both before and after the improvements that Denise influences. The novel presents a different focus with each chapter, returning to each focus to show how things have changed over time.



## Quotes

"Here, there was the continuous purring of a machine at work, the customers shovelled in, heaped in front of the displays and dazzled by the goods, before being hurled against the cash desks. And it was all organized and regulated with mechanical precision, a whole nation of women caught up in the power and logic of the turning cogs." (Chapter 1, p. 16)

"And his passions were like an advertisement for the shop: you might have thought that he was embracing the whole of the fair sex in a single caress, the better to bewitch them and keep them at his mercy." (Chapter 2, p. 33)

"A shrug of the shoulders seemed to indicate that he would discard them all like empty wrapping paper, once they had helped him to make his fortune." (Chapter 2, p. 34)

"We'll lose a few centimes on each item, I admit. So what? A fine disaster that will be if we attract all those women and have them at our mercy, enthralled, driven crazy by the profusion of merchandise and emptying their purses, without pausing to count. All that matters, my dear friend, is to excite them, and for that we need one item which cajoles them and causes a stir. After that, you can sell the rest as dear as it is elsewhere and they'll still think they are getting it cheaper from you..." (Chapter 2, p. 39)

"The ordinary sales staff in the firm make three or four thousand francs, more than you do, and their education never cost anything, unlike yours, they were never sent out into the world with a signed guarantee that they would conquer it. Of course, earning money is not everything. All I can say, though is that between the poor devils with a veneer of education who clutter up the liberal professions and don't have enough to fill their bellies, and practical chaps, well prepared for life, who know their job from top to bottom—darn it, I know which I'd choose: I'm for the second against the first, because I think these are the ones who really understand the times we live in." (Chapter 3, p. 65)

"Woman was what the shops were fighting over when they competed, it was woman whom they ensnared with the constant trap of their bargains, after stunning her with their displays. They had aroused new desires in her flesh, they were a huge temptation to which she must fatally succumb, first of all giving in to the purchases of a good housewife, then seduced by vanity and finally consumed." (Chapter 3, p. 75)

"The idea of having the merchandise at a loss stirred the callous side of their feminine nature, which means that a woman's pleasure in buying something is doubled when she thinks she is robbing the person who sells it to her." (Chapter 3, p. 80)

"He was Woman: they felt penetrated and possessed by that delicate sense he had of their innermost beings, and they abandoned themselves, seduced by him; while he, now certain that he had them at his mercy, enthroned as conqueror above them, seemed like the despotic clothing king." (Chapter 3, p. 83)



"This was her life now. She had to smile, put a brave and pleasant face on everything, in a silk dress that did not belong to her, and she ached with tiredness, was ill-fed, badly treated, constantly under threat of summary dismissal." (Chapter 5, p. 121)

"Was love so stupid then? What! Here was a young man who had such happiness within his grasp yet was ruining his life, worshipping this hussy as though she were the holy sacrament!" (Chapter 5, p. 131)

"Mixing daily with the customers, almost all the assistants took on airs and ended up in an indistinct social class, somewhere between the workers and the bourgeoisie; but beneath their skill in dressing, beneath the manners and ways of speaking they had acquired, there was often only a superficial learning, picked up through reading the popular newspapers, from speeches in the theatre and all the nonsense going the rounds on the streets of Paris." (Chapter 6, p. 152)

"As a matter of fact, everyone in the department, from the new recruit aspiring to become a salesman, to the chief salesman coveting a managerial post, had only one obsession, which was to unseat the colleague above him in order to move up one step, and to devour him if he became an obstacle. And this clash of desires, with each one pushing against the next, was central to the smooth running of the machine which stimulated sales and lit a flame of success that amazed the whole of Paris." (Chapter 6, p. 158)

"Yes, count on it—and live on hot air! Oh, they're not sparing when it comes to fine words. If you want promises, here's plenty! Then they feed you old leather and kick you out of the door like a dog!" (Chapter 6, p. 162)

"And yet, she only had to agree. Her poverty would be over, she would have money, dresses and a fine room. It was easy: they said that all women came to that eventually, because in Paris a woman could not live from her work alone. But something in her being revolted against it, without any indignation against other women, but simply rejecting what was demeaning and unreasonable. Her concept of life was logic, wisdom and courage." (Chapter 7, p. 182)

"One can be respectable wherever one lives, and there is even greater merit in being so when you are not wealthy." (Chapter 7, p. 201)

"This is why everything was falling apart, the family no longer existed, people lived in hotels, instead of eating their soup decently in their own homes." (Chapter 8, p. 218)

"In short, if they wanted to behave, they could, because unlike the working girls on the streets of Paris they did not have to feed and house themselves: they had their meals and a bed, so their lives were assured, hard though they were. The worst thing was their vague, indeterminate situation, between shop girls and ladies. Thrown into all that luxury, without any basic education, they formed a nameless class apart: this was the source of their misfortunes and their vices." (Chapter 11, p. 306)



"They tore each other to pieces behind the counters, one woman devouring another, in a bitter rivalry of money and beauty. There was this surly jealousy of the salesgirls towards well-dressed customers, the ladies whose manners they tried to copy and a still greater jealousy of badly dressed, petty bourgeois customers against the salesgirls, with their silk dresses, whom they expected to humble themselves like servants for a purchase of ten sous." (Chapter 11, p. 306)

"Take everything from a woman, exploit her like a coal mine, because afterwards she'll be the one who exploits you and makes you cough up! Be careful, because she'll get more blood and money out of you than you ever did out of her." (Chapter 11, p. 310)

"This dog's life made the best of them bad and the sad procession began: all of them eaten up by the job before the age of forty, disappearing into the unknown, several of them dying, consumptive or anaemic, killed by exhaustion or the bad air, some ending on the streets, the luckiest married and buried in some little shop in the provinces. Was it human, was it right, this appalling consumption of flesh by the department stores every year?" (Chapter 12, p. 348)

"One should always believe women to be respectable, Monsieur. I can assure you, there are many who are." (Chapter 12, p. 345)

"You could not cling to your dead, you had to bury them—and with a gesture he dispatched underground, swept aside and cast into the paupers' grave the corpse of old-fashioned trade, the mouldy, diseased remains of which were becoming a blot on the sunny streets of the new Paris. No, no, he felt no remorse, he was simply doing the work of his time, as she very well knew, being someone who loved life and had a passion for grand schemes carried out in the full light of publicity." (Chapter 13, p. 367)

"And she could not save any of them; she knew that it was good and that this dunghill of miseries was essential to the health of the Paris of tomorrow. When day came, she grew calmer, a great sorrowful sense of resignation keeping her eyes open and turned towards the slowly lightened window panes. Yes, it was the debt of blood: every revolution needed martyrs and one could only go forward over the dead. Her fear of having been a bane to them, of having participated in the murder of those close to her, now dissolved into a pitying sense of regret at these unavoidable ills which are the birth pangs of every generation." (Chapter 13, p. 368)

"Mouret had invented this machine for crushing people, the brutal operation of which outraged her. He had strewn the neighborhood with ruins, dispossessing some and killing others; and she loved him despite it all for the greatness of what he was doing, she loved him more and more at each excess of his power, despite the flood of tears that swept over her when she witnessed the sacred suffering of the vanquished." (Chapter 13, p. 380)

"It was as though the colossus, after its successive expansions, seized by shame and repugnance for the dingy district in which it had its humble birth—and which it subsequently slaughtered—had just turned its back, leaving behind the mud of these

narrow streets, and offering its parvenu's face to the noisy, sunlit avenue of the New Paris." (Chapter 14, p. 382)



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the idea of inherited traits. Give examples of characters who show inherited or acquired traits, as well as characters who show inherited physical traits.

Mouret argues that the middle class finds a better life through the department store and its marked prices. Madame Marty is the representative of the middle class. Does she really have a better life?

Discuss the role of luck in Mouret's success and Baudu's failure.

How does the department store act as a new religion? Discuss examples of viewpoints of different characters on this issue.

What do the characters who resist gain? What do the characters who give in or give up gain? Discuss.

How is working in a department store like slavery? How does this affect the discussions of class?

What role do gossip and public perception play in the novel's plots and themes?

Explain the novel's presentation of the idea of money and consumption.

What is the difference in the novel between giving in and simply resisting change? Explain how this affects progress.

Explain the power of women in the novel. According to the novel, what are women's weaknesses? What about men's power and weaknesses?

Mouret decides to marry Denise, and Colomban decides to quit his job and pursue Clara. Both men consider their actions reckless. Explain why or how they are wrong.