Abstract

Dying in Detail:

Feminine death and the question of authorship in 19th century French fiction

This dissertation examines the paradoxical status of the feminine death scene throughout 19th century French fiction. Focusing on novels and a novella produced after the birth of Realism, Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1835), Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856)*,* Emile Zola’s *Nana* (1880), and Guy de Maupassant’s “Yvette” (1884), it is specifically interested in looking at the effects that the growing importance of the detail in narrative production has had on the representations of feminine deaths.

Certainly, the most obvious effect has been on the aesthetic of the death scene. The 19th century’s early idealization of the dead feminine form, characteristic of the romantic tradition, is gradually replaced by a more gruesome depiction of death. Who can forget the smallpox which turns Nana, the perfection of the feminine form, into an oozy mass of discarded flesh? or Emma’s horrendous suicide, punctuated by the detailed descriptions of her vomit (first white and gravelly, then thick and black as ink)? Narrated in detail, these feminine deaths appear fiercely opposed to the alignment of death and beauty. Each text stresses the physical symptoms of death and highlights the body of the protagonist: she rots, yellows, pales, and decays.

However subversive they may seem in the realm of aesthetics, the “detailed deaths” of feminine protagonists also raise troubling questions with regard to narrative production and authorship. The three chapters which make up this dissertation examine the ways that details, instead of participating in the narrative’s elaboration, appear as fragments of another narrative. Rather than operate in a manner consistent with their narrative function, as the tools of the masculine author, the details that fill the deaths of feminine protagonists depict a woman’s death as a conscious act of authorship. Mme de Mortsauf, Emma, Nana and Yvette all fiercely appropriate the odious realities of their deaths to author something other than the fiction to which they belong.