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Beyond the Physical: Exploring the Function of Disease in Selected Words of 19th- and 20th-Century French Literature

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Beyond the Physical

Exploring the Function of Disease in Selected Works of 19th- and 20th- Century French
Literature

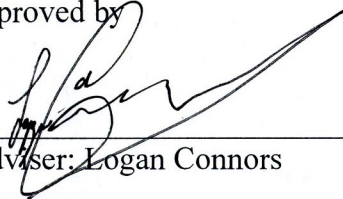
By

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Approved by



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Cassandra Ricci
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Abstract

My thesis, *Beyond the Physical*, is a project that aims to investigate the function of disease in 19th and 20th century French literature through the analysis of the narrative techniques of three fictional novels and secondary sources. This work is an interdisciplinary study that combines the social and scientific aspects of Public Health with literary elements present in French and Francophone Studies.

In *La Cousine Bette* (1847), a Realist novel by Honoré de Balzac, Valérie Marneffe's obsession with greed and attention leads her to pursue various extramarital affairs in her efforts to augment her financial status. Her death by syphilis eliminates her ability to use sex and beauty to attract men only after she has settled on a wealthy entrepreneurial lover. *Nana* (1880), by Émile Zola, is a Naturalist novel about a young Parisian prostitute who dies from small pox, a 19th- century epidemic, after she uses her body to exploit and manipulate high society men in her endeavors of social mobility and status. Both *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana* employ disease to objectively comment on the interactions and lifestyles of the bourgeois and lower classes and the consequence of altering one's reality.

Le Protocol Compassionnel (1991), by Hervé Guibert, shows a shift in the conversation about disease. Rather than observing the interactions of the infected individual in a social setting, the genre of AIDS literature switches from the "he/she" to the "I" to offer readers an intimate account of one's existence. In these three novels, disease takes on many different functions, but what all of these works share is the treatment and discussion of illness beyond its physical and biological roles.

Introduction

The function of disease in literary texts have included illness as a sign of divine power or providence; illness or epidemics as the test of the moral fibre of the afflicted individual and society, exposing their true nature; disease as a recurrent metaphor for moral or social decay; as a vision of collective social disaster; as a sign of the individual's inability to escape from a destined fate; a catalyst for artistic or intellectual genius and a sign of emotional, intellectual or moral curiosity or superiority; as a means of redemption for the fallen or the outcast; as a way of heightening the awareness of death, calling up questions of mortality and life's complexity; and as an alien, incomprehensible force penetrating human life and destroying it (Lupton 55).

As Deborah Lupton explains in the text *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease, and the Body in Western Societies*, literature uses disease as a metaphor to explore the various meanings of illness beyond a medical perspective. This thesis examines the function of disease in three works of critical fiction from 19th- and 20th- century French literature, *La Cousine Bette* (1847) by Honoré de Balzac, *Nana* (1880) by Emile Zola, and *Le Protocol Compassionnel* by Hervé Guibert (1991). Each author wrote about disease through his literary aesthetic and epidemiological context that was historically relevant at the time of the novel's publication. I seek to examine how Balzac, Zola, and Guibert interpreted the function of disease through the Realism, Naturalism, and the genre of AIDS literature, respectively.

These three novels all have characters that suffer from venereal, or sexually transmitted diseases or a disease that can be acquired through intimate contact. As sex is an action surrounded by immense social scrutiny, all of my critical works address the relationships between the infected individual and his or her community. In *La Cousine Bette*, Valérie Marneffe dies from syphilis after engaging in adulterous affairs in her quest for wealth and financial security. *Nana* is about a young French prostitute who perishes from small pox after desperately trying and failing to become part of the bourgeoisie. The objective narration of *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana* is a point to highlight. Margaret Platts explains in the article, *Some medical syndromes encountered in nineteenth-century French literature*:

Very few of the novels are written in the first person... it is obvious that most of the descriptions of disease are founded on either the personal observations of the author or on accounts given him by books or third parties. Since, in many instances, these episodes of sickness, births and deaths are important and integral parts of the novels the behaviour of the characters is profoundly affected by them, illustrating an aspect of disease not usually addressed in treatises on medical history. (Platts 87)

As neither novel uses first person narration, it is clear that the reader witnesses the progression of disease from the perspective of uninfected individuals who have the potential to offer insight and criticism on the patient's behavior.

The final novel I will analyze, *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, shows that just as medicine progresses through time, the conversation about disease in literature changes.

Hervé Guibert's second novel in an AIDS diary trilogy is about a gay man living with AIDS and depicts the struggles in his quest for a cure to salvage his deteriorating body. His writing about disease seeks a therapeutic and humanizing function, rather than consequential.

My interest in this examination of disease beyond its physical context is inspired by my interdisciplinary education in the Biological Sciences and French and Francophone Studies. My desire to explore French Literature for this project is very appropriate as "in the nineteenth century, France was the acknowledged leader in medicine and simultaneously there was an extraordinary flowering of French Novels" (Platts 82). Thus, works of French Literature have been noted to be influential in discourse on disease and medicine. Also, as I intend to pursue a career in public health, this unique project addresses many established principles of the field: social consequences of health, modes of transmission, and the synthesis of anthropological and biological inquires.

The chapters of *Beyond the Physical* follow a similar structure. After a brief introduction, I present each novel's respective literary aesthetic and characteristics. Each chapter contains a biological, historical, and social overview of small pox, syphilis, or HIV/AIDS. The chapters of *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana* conclude by examining the function of disease as a consequence of desire and social mobility. The chapter on *Le Protocol Compassionnel* concludes by explaining how Hervé Guibert's intimate AIDS diary humanizes and writes his experience with disease for therapeutic function. In the

conclusion, I summarize the aforementioned findings and make predictions on the future functions of disease in literature.

Chapter 1: Syphilis and Realism in *La Cousine Bette*

Introduction

According to Robert Berg and Fabrice Leroy's text, *Littérature Française: Textes et Contextes*, the 19th-century author Honoré de Balzac is "le père...le maître incontesté...le représentant le plus complet du réalisme"(166). Described as the father and uncontested master of Realism, Balzac chronicles the ambitions, desires, and infidelities of French society following the fall of the First Empire in the work *La Cousine Bette* (1847). This chapter explores the function of syphilis through the death of Valérie Marneffe, the young and desirable mistress of several married wealthy men.

In *La Cousine Bette*, Balzac writes about the various interactions and intimate conflicts between several Parisian families. The promiscuous Valérie Marneffe becomes the mistress of Baron Hulot, Monsieur Crevel, Wenceslas Steinbrook, and Baron Montes de Montejanos, in hopes of finding a lover who can satisfy her unrelenting obsessions with greed and wealth. A novel of the Realist movement, *La Cousine Bette* contains exhaustive descriptions of characters, objects, and settings, an emphasis on human existence, and typical Balzacien "monomania", a character's critical obsession. Valérie Marneffe's final scene describes her and her final lover's gruesome death by syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease present in 19th- century France. Just as Valérie finally reaches the object of her desire, a lover of admirable wealth and financial stability, her

death by syphilis is a fatal consequence commenting on the use of sexuality to pressure others into getting what they want.

In this chapter, I will explore the essentials of Realism and Balzac's literary aesthetic in the novel through textual examples. The next section will examine Valérie Marneffe and highlight her appearance, manipulative nature, and relationships. After the character commentary, I will give a biological, historical, and social description of syphilis. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Valérie's death scene and will explain the utility of syphilis as a consequence for using sexual pretenses to pursue one's greedy and selfish desires.

Realism

Before Realism emerged in the late 19th century, the Romantic literary movement dominated in almost every country of Europe, the United States, and Latin America from 1750 to 1870 (Schwartz 1). In *Unmasking the Bourgeoise*, Schwartz describes Romantic authors as "preoccupied with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his passions and inner struggles and there was an emphasis on the examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities"(1). In the wake of the Industrial Revolution and other scientific achievements, these authors found themselves discontent with precise rules, laws, dogmas, and formulas that stifled creativity and diminished the importance of the individual. "By about the middle of the

19th century, romanticism began to give way to new literary movements: the Parnassians and the symbolist movement in poetry, realism and naturalism”(Schwartz 1).

In his *Critical Analysis of Realism*, E. Preston Dargan states, “It is the art of representing actuality, viewed largely from the material standpoint, in a way to produce as closely as possible the impression of the truth”(352). In Realism, authors observe and document every detail through exhaustive descriptions to provide readers with a clear and unambiguous image of the reality of their characters. Berg and Leroy describe Balzac’s Realism as describing:

Tous les effets sociaux, sans que ni une situation de la vie, ni une physionomie, ni un caractère de l’homme ou de femme, ni une manière de vivre, ni une profession, ni une zone sociale, ni un pays français, ni quoi que ce soit de l’enfance, de la vieillesse, de l’âge mûr, de la politique, de la justice, de la guerre, ait été oublié (166).

In Balzac’s novels, he includes every aspect of the characters’ lives through descriptions of their physical appearances, traits, familial histories, political persuasion, ages, and life experiences. These precise and detailed descriptions help to create “la peinture intégrale de la société française” and illustrate every aspect pertinent to portraying one’s reality through literature (Berg and Leroy 166).

Balzac uses dialogue to obtain information, familial and personal pasts to situate characters, and detailed descriptions of scenery from a material standpoint to write the realities of French society in *La Cousine Bette*. For example, the first description of the

titular character contains many insightful details of her appearance to help the reader envision the character:

Cette vieille fille portait une robe de mérinos, couleur raisin de Corinthe, dont la coupe et les lisérés dataient de la Restauration, une collerette brodée qui pouvait valoir trois francs, un chapeau de paille cousue à coques de satin bleu bordées de paille come on en voit aux revendeuses de la halle. A l'aspect de souliers en peau de chèvre dont la façon annonçait un cordonnier du dernier ordre, un étranger aurait hésité à saleur la Cousine Bette comme une parente de la maison (15).

Balzac specifies the exact shade of Bette's dress as the purple of Grecian Corinth grapes, linking the color to a physical object and geographical location. By using a precise lexicon, Balzac eliminates the need for personal interpretation or imagination, giving the reader all the detail and specificity one needs to visualize Bette's dress. The observation and documentation of her dress continues with the description of the material components of her hat, straw and ribbon, and her goatskin shoes. The material emphasis in *La Cousine Bette* mirrors the increasing concern over commodities and innovation at the time of 19th- century France. Bette's dress is adorned with a lace ruff, a starch frill worn around the neck, estimated to cost three francs. Including the monetary value with sartorial documentation links the exhaustiveness of Realism with a principal Balzacian theme, "le theme de l'argent (money)"(Berg and Leroy 167).

According to Balzac, "on travaille beaucoup, on gagne de l'argent, on en perd"(Berg and Leroy 167). This dogma of human existence: working for money, making money, and spending money, reveals itself many times in the novel. Dargan agrees that

Balzac's literature "introduced the treatment of these chief material preoccupations: living, which depends on eating, which depends upon money, which depends upon work, which depends upon a trade or profession"(356). In the text, character descriptions are associated with their profession and their financial success and stability.

In the beginning of the novel, Monsieur Crevel tries to convince Madame Hulot to be with him by taunting her with her husband's affairs and frivolousness. To make him seem worthy of Madame Hulot's affection, Crevel describes his success since his retirement from the perfume industry:

Hulot m'a donné le droit, comme je vous disais, de poser le marché, tout crûment, et il ne se fâchera pas. Depuis trios ans, j'ai fait valoir mes capitaux, car mes fredaines ont été restreintes. J'ai trios cent mille francs de gain en dehors de ma fortune, ils sont à vous...(Balzac 27)

In just three years, Crevel has saved his income and made smart decisions on his investments, which put him in a more favorable financial status than Baron Hulot, who squanders his fortune on expensive and fleeting lovers. Crevel states that he has three hundred thousand francs, the modern equivalent to fifty thousand US dollars, in his account that could all be Madame Hulot's if she would choose him. This emphasis on money and materialism is very characteristic of Balzacien realism and is a dominant theme throughout *La Cousine Bette*.

Perhaps the most characteristic of Balzac's literary contribution is the "personage balzacien" (Berg and Leroy 167). Amidst the description and documentation within a Balzacian novel, characters stand apart from each other based on their obsessions and

desires. “Therefore they are frequently monomaniacs, they are possessed by a ruling passion that dominates the book”(Dargan 365). The characters in *La Cousine Bette* have obsessions that govern their actions and feelings through the course of the novel.

Cousine Bette harbors negative feelings towards her family members after witnessing the attention her cousin, Adeline, received in her beautiful youth. To show how the family treats her differently, Cousine Bette expressed, “Adeline et moi, nous sommes du même sang, nos pères étaient frères, elle est dans un hôtel et je suis dans une mansarde (attic room)” (Balzac 41). By saying that Adeline is in a hotel suite and she is in an attic crawlspace, Cousine Bette is showing how her family preferentially treats Adeline over her. Throughout the novel, Bette uses her diabolical plots and obsession with revenge to create contentious situations in her cousin’s life. Proclaiming herself “Le confessionnal de la famille,” Cousine Bette finds herself privy to Baron Hulot’s secrets and encourages him to act upon his adulterous desires. When the Baron approached Cousine Bette and asked her what she thought about Valérie Marneffe, Cousine Bette encouraged him to pursue her and even befriended Valérie to spite Adeline. At the end of the novel, Cousine Bette proudly embraces her obsession, “Moi!...J’ai vu la vengeance partout dans la nature, les insectes périssent pour satisfaire le besoin de se venger quand on les attaque” (Balzac 393). In Sarah Maza’s article *Uniforms: The Social Imagery in Balzac’s “La Cousine Bette,”* Bette is described as “virgin and witch, sacred and diabolical, marginal and all powerful”(31). The combination of these traits and the stewing memories of her less than ideal childhood have developed into a deep-seeded vengeance in all situations.

Valérie Marneffe's ruling obsession is greed. Since the men of her many adulterous relationships took care of her monetary and material needs, Valérie accumulated a decent amount of wealth at her young age:

Aussi cette femme si pure, si candide, possédait-elle alors environ cent cinquante mille francs d'économies. Elle avait accumulé ses rentes et ses bénéfices mensuels en les capitalisant et le grossissant de gains énormes dus à la générosité avec laquelle Crevel...elle était promptement devenue plus forte que son maître (158).

Although she is only in her mid twenties, Valérie has accumulated one hundred and fifty thousand francs in her savings, as well as capitalizing on interest of her income and monthly bonus. Despite the fact that she is financially savvy and knowledgeable with investing, her greed motivates her to seek men for their wealth and monetary value. Valérie has even been described as one of the "tigers of finance"(Jameson 246). Her relationship with Baron Hulot flourishes after he spends lavishly to furnish an apartment for the mistress, but ultimately ends when he is convicted of embezzling funds from the government. The short-lived affair with Wenceslas Steinbrook came only after Valérie realized how artistically talented he was, and how his sculptures could potentially bring her fame and prosperity. Her relationship with ex-parfumeur Monsieur Crevel, to be further discussed with Valérie's appearance, nature, and other relationships in the following section, is also based on his accumulated wealth and entrepreneurial nature.

Valérie Marneffe

In the following description, it is clear that Balzac was fascinated with Valérie's sensuality which Balzacien scholars have named the "complete" woman. (324) Among pages of documentation of character descriptions and analysis, Balzac gives this portrait of Valérie:

Valérie, protégée par ces deux passions en sentinelle à ses côtés et par un mari jaloux, attirait tous les regards, excitait tous les désirs, dans le cercle où elle rayonnait. Ainsi, tout en gardant les apparences, elle était arrivée, en trois ans environ, à réaliser les conditions les plus difficiles du succès que cherchent les courtisanes, et qu'elles accomplissent si rarement, aidées par le scandale, par leur audace et par l'éclat de leur vie au soleil. Comme un diamant bien taillé que Chanor aurait délicieusement serti, la beauté de Valérie, naguère enfouie dans la mine de la rue Doyenné, valait plus que sa valeur, elle faisait des malheureux!" (154).

In the above description, Balzac's lexicon is uniquely chosen as to create an ethereal, yet seductive image of the young, sophisticated woman. The first sentence, quantifying the amount of lovers in queue shows that Valérie is widely desired by many men other than her husband, Monsieur Marneffe. Her attractiveness captivates anyone whom she comes in contact with. The word *excitait* specifically indicates that her presence is sexually arousing. She shines within her social circle, attracting others to follow and worship her

like a goddess. As previously described, Valérie's monomaniac obsession is greed. By likening her beauty to that of an expensive diamond, Balzac demonstrates how the obsessions of his characters are all encompassing in their being. In Prendergast's analysis of *La Cousine Bette*, he agrees that Balzac describes Valérie as the result of a unity between "the two elements of the carnal and the spiritual in an ideal synthesis" (324).

The female characters in *La Cousine Bette* "are seen as malevolent and hostile, as forces of destruction," and Valérie is no exception (Jameson 246). A critical scene displaying her wicked character occurs when she finds herself with child, unable to determine its paternity. During breakfast with her husband, Monsieur Marneffe, Valérie inquires, "Dis donc, Marneffe? te doutes-tu d'être père pour la seconde fois" (Balzac 234). After revealing her pregnancy with Marneffe, Valérie leaves the kitchen to write a note to Wenceslas to tell him he is the father of the child. Hortense, Wenceslas' wife intercepts the letter and reads it, prompting her to leave her husband and get a divorce. At the same time, she crafts another letter telling Baron Hulot of the news, who is excited at the thought of beginning a new life with Valérie and their unborn child. In her manipulative pursuits, Valérie is a destructive force that wrecks the marriages and families of her lovers.

One of the most intriguing of Valérie's relationships is her passionate affair with the Brazilian Baron Henri Montes de Montejanos. After having sold all of his possessions in Rio De Janerio, Henri committed his heart and soul to his return to Paris and search for Valérie. Balzac describes him:

Fier d'aimer Valérie et d'être aimé d'elle, le sourire du baron offrait à ses connaisseurs émérites une teinte d'ironie, et il était d'ailleurs superbe à voir: les vins n'avaient pas altéré sa coloration (370).

Baron Montejanos takes so much pride in his love to Valérie that not even wine could affect his profound loyalty and honor. With this pride comes an unrelenting desire to be Valérie's only lover. When she discards his advances for another man, Baron Montejanos seeks vengeance against Valérie and devises a plot to infect the newlyweds with crippling disease and death in return for his betrayal.

In the end, Valérie discards Baron Hulot, Wenceslas Steinbrook, Monsieur Marneffe, and Baron Montejanos for Monsieur Crevel, the wealthiest suitor. Their marriage is a perfect union as they are "equally vulgar, self-interested, and financially shrewd" (Maza 29). As the two plan to wed, Valérie's addiction to consummation and money remains apparent. Victorin, son of Baron Hulot describes Valérie:

Cette veuve de vingt-neuf ans a si bien fait son métier de *voleuse* qu'elle a quarante mille francs de rentes prises à deux pères de famille. Elle est sur le point d'engloutir quatre vingt mille francs de rente en épousant un bonhomme de soixante et un ans; elle ruinera toute une honnête famille (Balzac 348).

In Victorin's angry proclamation, Valérie is a conniving thief who has already robbed the fathers of two families. By marrying Crevel, a man thirty-two years her senior, she will inherit eighty thousand francs a year, as well as ruining a respectable family. She consumes, spends, and inevitably leaves a path of destruction. At the end of the novel,

Crevel and Valérie perish together from syphilis, a disease transmitted through intimate contact that disfigures the body through lesions and cutaneous infections.

Portrait of Syphilis

The venereal disease, syphilis, transmitted from partner to partner during sexual intercourse, mysteriously emerged in Europe at the end of the 15th century. This period is known as the bridge between the Late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Early medical histories believe that the disease originated from the army of Charles VIII of France, after launching an invasion of Italy in the later 1490s. After their defeat, the troops returned to their various home countries and it is believed that their reestablishment began the spread of syphilis across Europe. Other accounts suggest that ships traveling from the West Indies to Europe in the 1490s introduced the disease. The third is that syphilis originated in Africa and spread in Spain and Portugal by the importation of slaves. The origin of the disease still remains disputed despite scientific and technologic advancements.

Besides transmission through intimate activity, one can acquire the syphilis by “the transplacental route, by a person with an open lesion in the mouth, sharing a drinking vessel, use of hypodermic needles, tending to an infected individual, or by a contaminated medical environment” (Cartwright 41). Regardless of the agent or method of infection, the transmission of syphilis occurs through an intentional closeness between two individuals. From the initial infection, the bacterium can incubate for ten to ninety days, but after a couple of weeks, primary symptoms appear. Ulcers, a local tissue

reaction, form at the site of contact. Traditionally the chancres develop at the genital organs, but depending on the infected region, this could be the lip or finger. The chancre should spontaneously disappear within three to eight weeks, but if persistent, the patient may progress into the second stage.

After the primary infection, symptoms may be prolonged for one to two years. One may experience discomfort and headache among other normal bacterial reactions, and an unsightly skin rash that develops in 75% of cases (Cartwright 41). Known as “the great mimic,” syphilis can be mistaken for many other diseases because of its resemblance to other rash-causing diseases, such as measles or small pox (Cartwright 43). The most contagious stage of syphilis is during the early latent stage, during which the infected individual does not feel any symptoms or danger. Cutaneous manifestations do not always develop in the early stages. Thus, many infected individuals may go untreated and die. Tertiary syphilis can develop from three to even twenty years after the primary infection. Syphilis became “a rarity in the Western world by the late twentieth century”, thanks to novel antibiotic therapies (Cartwright 42).

In 19th century France, the setting of *La Cousine Bette*, syphilis was surrounded by a cloud of stigmatization. According to Gerard Tilles , “the anxiety about syphilis became stronger and stronger to such an extent that it was considered to encompass all the morbid manifestations of the morbid heredity in general” (Tilles 1). Potential exposure to the disease became an obsession. As it is possible to transmit through placental fluids, the public believed that this disease could produce a population of sick

and degenerate children. Stigma in the medical system was displayed by the creation of separate hospitals specifically for the care of syphilis patients.

According to Tilles , the syphilis contagion was primarily transported into families through prostitutes or women of the working class (2). Thus, if an individual had syphilis, it was suggested that he engaged in extramarital or adulterous affairs. Medical imprisonment was a method of condemning prostitutes with this fateful disease and prostitution in France because highly regulated and controlled by federal administration. From the rise of syphilis, the *Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale* (SFPSM), lobbied for “the regulation the prostitution and in the through about sexuality lead by physicians, military people and the families of the upper classes (Tilles 3). This emphasis on social order and preservation facilitated a fear of prostitutes, sexuality, and the threat to the honesty of marriage. The next section examines the function of syphilis in Valérie Marneffe’s death scene.

Valérie’s Death

According to Frederic Jameson, “the conclusion of *La Cousine Bette* presents the ultimate spectacle of the dissolution of human like in time, of the impermanence of human projects and values, an almost bodily or biological decay of human fortune”(252). Although Valérie has found her wealthy lover at the end of the novel, she cannot enjoy her riches for long as she quickly perishes of syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease.

Through the voice of the physician, Balzac describes the grotesque and graphic reality of Valérie's physical condition:

La pauvre créature, qui, dit-on était jolie, et bien punie par où elle a péché, car elle est aujourd'hui d'une ignoble laideur, si toutefois elle est quelque chose !...ses dents et ses cheveux tombent, elle a l'aspect des lépreux, elle se fait horreur à elle-même ; ses mains, épouvantables à voir, sont enflées et couvertes de pustules verdâtres ; les ongles déchaussées restent dans les plaies qu'elle gratte ; enfin toutes les extrémités se détruisent dans la saignée qui les rouge (390).

Valérie is being punished (*punie*) for exploiting her sexual passions by being transformed into an ugly, disfigured corpse. Oozing, green pustules cover her once delicate hands, and her porcelain complexion is eaten away by the bodily poison. Resembling a leper, her thinning hair and rotting teeth fall from her head, and her lacquered nails loosen and disintegrate. Syphilis strips Valérie of her once beautiful physique, and leaves behind a bloody carcass. The weeping Cousine Bette offers her final remarks, "Il ne reste pas un seul trait d'elle! Et l'esprit a déménagé! Oh! C'est effrayant"(Balzac 393). Cousine Bette cannot recognize Valérie without her beauty and wit as syphilis has destroyed her two tools of manipulation and desire.

Scholars have deemed *La Cousine Bette* as "Balzac's most sustained imaginative inquiry into the forms and pressures of sexuality" (Prendergast 322). Although Valérie's monomaniac obsession was wealth and not love, she used her sexuality to shape her relationships and chase her greedy desires. Her affliction with syphilis coincidentally comes at a time in French history when prostitutes were the primary agents of the syphilis

epidemic. As explained by Gérard Tilles in *Stigma of syphilis in 19th century France*, “the syphilis contagion was considered as being transported into families from prostitutes or women of the working classes. By inciting the husband to commit adultery, they attacked the integrity of the social order and by transmitting syphilis, considered as hereditary, to honest families” (2). Thus, her death by syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, is realistic end for a promiscuous and adulterous woman in 19th- century France. In the text, Victorin, Baron Hulot’s son, stated that Valérie was a threat to two honest and respectable Parisian families. The synthesis of the historical and textual evidence shows that Valérie and syphilis were threats to the familial and social order of the time.

In the novel, characters’ desires have shaped and directed the plot in a number of different ways. From Baron Hulot’s obsession with love, to the passionate violence of Baron Montejanos, to Cousine Bette’s quest for vengeance, and finally Valérie’s greed, the use of sex to chase one’s desire is a major point of reference and thematic organization in the text. The function of syphilis coincides with “Balzac’s awareness of desire as something deeply problematic”(Prendergast 322). Even Valérie understand that her actions and desires have caused her death:

Je n’ai plus qu’un jour ou deux à penser, car je ne puis pas dire *vivre*. Tu le vois?
 Je n’ai plus de corps, je suis un tas de boue. On ne me permet pas de me regarder dans un mirror...Je n’ai que ce que je mérite. Ah! Je voudrais, pour être recue à merci, réparer tout le mal que j’ai fait (Balzac 393).

Valérie realizes that her human body is now a heaping pile of mud, and she has lost her identity to this disease. After reflecting on all of the mischief and exploitation of desire she has done, Valérie understands that she deserves this gruesome fate.

Valérie's death criticizes the characters' exploitation of romance and intimacy by literally punishing her body through a disease only transmitted through sexual contact. Thus, the use of syphilis as Valérie's cause of death addresses Balzac's inquiry into the forms and pressures of sexuality by showing that using sex as a manipulative tactic in materialistic society could be met with unfortunate and unsightly consequence.

Chapter 2: Small Pox and Naturalism in *Nana*

Introduction

In *Discussion sur le Naturalisme Français*, author Helmut A. Hatzfeld describes this 19th- century movement as “la soie brillante de l’imagination avec l’étoffe solide de la science” (698). Combining literature and science, Naturalism ventures beyond Romantic sentimentality and the Realist quotidian to approach reality through objectivity and exaggerated detail (Berg and Martin 9). Scholars acknowledge Naturalism as “l’oeuvre de Zola,” as the greatest works of this movement come from Zola’s literary laboratory (Berg and Leroy 247). This chapter examines the novel *Nana* (1880) as it faithfully demonstrates a blend of literature and scientific experimentation and explores the function of disease beyond its physical characteristics.

In *Nana*, the titular character is a young Parisian prostitute who is introduced to the bourgeois social scene in a theatrical performance of Bordenauve’s *La Blonde Vénus*. Throughout the novel, Nana uses her physical appearance in her pursuit of social mobility and adulterous relationships with high society men. It seems as if her attempts to emerge from her class are successful, as she lives a life beyond her financial means and exploits sex and beauty to gain the affection and adoration of elite men. The final chapter of *Nana* depicts her gruesome suffering with the small pox epidemic and her ultimate death with scientific precision. This disease transforms the infected individual from a vibrant being, to a crusty and bloody corpse. The acquisition and subsequent death by small pox

prohibit Nana from continuing to social climb and use beauty and physical appearance to attract suitors. It seems as if this externally degenerating disease functions as a consequence or potential outcome for people who wish to rise up from the lower classes and join higher ranks.

In this chapter, I will explore the origins and essentials of the Naturalist literary movement and Zola's usage in the novel through textual examples. The following sections will examine descriptions of Nana's body and address her two critical romantic relationships with Count Muffat and Georges. I provide a brief history of small pox and its biological manifestation in the body. Finally, I analyze Nana's death scene and seek to identify the function of disease as a commentary on the costs of seeking social mobility through the Naturalist perspective.

Naturalism

Although Naturalism bears similarities to Realism, such as objectivity and detailed description, this literary doctrine draws inspiration from “the philosophy of positivism, the notion of determinism, and by the development and popularization of the scientific method” (Berg and Martin 9). In Naturalism, the positivist emphasis on “observation rather than speculation and (an) interest in immanent, material phenomena” is clearly reflected through Zola's detailed descriptions of individual's appearances and actions (Berg and Martin 9). The dimension of determinism is observed in naturalism's “emphasis on physical phenomena...interest in depicting with historical accuracy particular and varied milieus (classes, regions, professions, and so forth)” (Berg and

Martin 10). Within *Nana*, Zola explores the inherited characteristics of various social classes, such as behavior and sexuality, the historical context and relevant issues, and the respective social and physical environment of his characters. Finally, the role of the scientific method is evident in the precise recording and narration of the novel and the positioning of characters in experimental situations. The influence of these three basal components and additional essentials of Naturalism are evident in textual examples of *Nana*.

Naturalism focuses on “l’imitation crue de la vie journalière, la traduction de tranches de vie dans leur simple et humble vérité” (Hatzfeld 696). To preserve objectivity and neutrality, Naturalist authors strive to write about daily happenings in their most raw and humble states. Typical events such as dining, sleeping, and talking are heightened through the use of multisensory description and exaggeration. The following excerpt describes Nana resting in her bedroom:

Nana dormait sur la ventre, serrant entre ses bras nus son oreiller, où elle enfonçait son visage tout blanc de sommeil. La chambre à coucher et le cabinet de toilette étaient les deux seules pièces qu’un tapissier du quartier avait soignées. Une lueur glissait sous un rideau, on distinguait le meuble de palissandre, les tentures et les sièges de demas broché, à grandes fleurs bleues sur fond gris. Mais, dans la moiteur de cette chambre ensommeillée, Nana s’éveilla en sursaut, comme surprise de sentir un vide près d’elle. Elle regarda le second oreiller qui s’étalait à côté du sien, avec le trou encore tiède d’une tête, au milieu des guipures (Zola 52-52).

Within this passage, Zola uses specific verbs and adjectives that give the reader a tactile and visual representation of Nana's slumber. While sleeping is typically considered a peaceful act, the choice of the verbs "serrer/to squeeze" and "enfonce/to push or drive in" describes Nana exerting great physical force during a time of rest. As Nana pushes her face into the pillow, she squeezes the soft object with her naked arms. The inclusion of the adjective "nus/naked" shows that she does not wear a sleeping gown or decoration, but is in a natural and unadorned state. With each piece of furniture, Zola includes the specific material, pattern, and color of its fabrication. Through the thick curtains, one could see the Brazilian Rosewood window frame, the gray, damask print chairs, and floral images, all illuminated by a beam of sunlight. By identifying the window frame as Brazilian Rosewood, Zola reestablished the piece of furniture with its earthy, raw origin. The combination of visual and tactile references offers the reader a tangible and observant representation of reality and does not require further imagination or speculation. This interest in the real and the raw is especially present in Nana's final death scene to be analyzed later in *Beyond the Physical*.

In his novels, Zola had a preoccupation with "le commun, le bas, et le laid, aux depends du rare, du noble, et du beau"(Berg and Leroy 249). Rather than continuing to focus on the bourgeois society like Realism, Naturalism gave attention to characters of lower classes, such as manual laborers, labor agitators, and as exemplified in *Nana*, prostitutes (Berg and Martin 13). Zola's naturalism has been described by scholars as reflecting his "humanitarianism and evolving socialism- his plight for the masses and his conviction that changes had to be made to improve their lot"(Berg and Martin 13). In

19th- century France, prostitutes were accused of bringing disease into homes and subjected to immense social stigma. Prostitution was regarded as “demoralizing the society” and “thus they deserved imprisonment as the only efficient treatment” (Tilles 2). Thus, by focusing on prostitutes and other marginalized groups, Naturalist authors could use their objective perspective to explore the realities of lower classes.

Sometimes those realities were not so cheerful, as Naturalism often cited “la misère de la vie humaine, (et) de l’absurdité de la creation” (Hatzefeld 711). In *Nana*, Zola discussed the misery of the human existence, and also questioned the normally joyful connotation of birth and childhood. Nana’s son, Louis, lives with his aunt, as Nana does not have the financial stability or maternal desire to care for anyone other than herself. As Nana is dying from small pox, she is unaware that her son has already perished from the same disease. In the hotel room, several women observe Nana’s rapid decay, but are reluctant to share with her the news of her dead child:

Elle ne savait rien encore, la malade s’était obstinée à ne pas le faire prévenir, lui gardant rancune de la mort de son petit. Alors, toutes s’apitoyèrent sur le petit, en se souvenant de l’avoir aperçu aux courses: un bébé plein de mal, et qui avait l’air si vieux et si triste; enfin de ces pauvres mioches qui n’ont pas demandé à naître” (Zola 467).

The negativity in this excerpt is undeniable, as Zola states that Louis didn’t ask to be born into such a sad and poor life. This pessimism and questioning of the human existence seems characteristic of Naturalism, as this movement strives to obtain an unembellished and honest view of reality.

Naturalism crosses the boundaries between literature and science by blending observation and experimentation to create authentic accounts of reality. Experimentation in literature “involves discovering causal relationships between phenomena, simplifying these complex relationships by a type of analysis akin to data processing in order to inductively formulate laws, provoking change through controlled variation in environmental conditions” (Berg and Martin 13). Experimentation in *Nana* occurs between characters of differing classes, linked by their desires for status and attention, in diverse social settings and environments. Zola’s Naturalism has set the stage, both literally and figuratively, for interesting and transformative encounters, especially for Count Muffat in Nana’s plush dressing room.

Zola took Nana from the streets of Pigalle to the plush theaters of Paris and observed her like a member of the audience, noting her physical appearance and interpersonal interactions. One of those audience members was Count Muffat, a man of pious virtue and a reserved nature. During Nana’s début performance, Muffat watched from his seat, “se haussait, béant, la face marbée de taches rouges”(Zola 49). Red faced and mouth gaping, the shy Count began his dynamic transformation within the initial moments of being in the same as Nana. Despite several attempts of resisting the young woman, such as declining an invitation to her dinner party, Count Muffat finds himself back in the theatre and chases after Nana to her dressing room. “Alors, seul avec Nana, cédant a une poussée de colère et de désir, Muffat courut derrière elle; et, au moment ou elle rentrait dans sa loge, il lui planta un rude baiser sur la nuque” (Zola 173). Angry at his inability to control his most primitive desires, the Count cedes to lust as he penetrates

Nana's soft neck with a kiss of hammer-like force. In this experiment, Zola places Count Muffat in an unfamiliar environment containing the potent elements of passion and seduction. Unable to maintain his behavioral homeostasis, the biological term for the stability of internal conditions, the Count reacts to his surroundings and undergoes a permanent and ultimately life-shattering psychological transformation later in the novel.

Another example of a scientific experiment comes later in the novel when Nana's body is tested as a childbearing vessel. From the beginning of *Nana* until this moment in Chapter 12, Nana had multiple adulterous relationships, rarely saw Louis, and was accumulating debt faster than she could comprehend. Two days after discussing religion, a someone ironic subject to chat about with a sex worker, Nana is found "étendue par terre, évanouie..dans une mare de sang, comme si on l'avait assassinée" (Zola 389). Lying in a pool of blood, it is revealed that Nana was actually three months pregnant and experiencing a miscarriage during the climax of her sexual promiscuity.

This miscarriage can be interpreted in two ways. As described in Berg and Martin's *Émile Zola Revisited*, the author had "sympathy for the plight of the masses" and perhaps by brining Nana the joy of a child would be a positive and pure relationship among her previous abusive ones (13). On the other hand, this could be a subjective commentary that if one exploits his or her sexual capacities, the consequence is painful and gruesome. Either way, the result of the experimental procedure of pregnancy within Nana's lustful body yielded failure. This showed that although science experiments may be perfectly designed and systematically produce the same result, they too are subject to the unpredictable nature of reality and uncontrollable variables.

It is important to note that this scientific perspective of Naturalism is achieved through Zola's intensive research on medicine, people, and the physical condition. Berg and Martin praise Zola's precision:

(He) attempted to apply these same principles to his art: telling his tales through the voice of an objective narrator; thoroughly researching the class, profession, or group described in the work; including precise, detailed, often voluminous descriptions of appearances and occurrences; and positing the influence of environment on the temperament and action of characters (13).

In the narration of Nana's death scene, the terminology and description of small pox symptoms are faithful to the most reputable medical organizations, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization. It is also clear that Zola, considered the historical context of the late 19th century, as at this time, the French government was taking legislative measures to regulate the sex market and control the spread of diseases such as syphilis and small pox (Tilles 1).

Hatzfeld notes the distinct psychological dimension in his *Discussion sur le naturalisme français* as being "une peinture terrible d'une société effarée, dévoyée, vivant au jour le jour" (699). Although I agree that *Nana* explores the perverted and mentally disturbing aspects of French society, the juxtaposition of the bourgeois and lower class gives the novel a unique behavioral dimension and insight on the mental changes when one is planted in a foreign milieu.

Despite her reviews splashed across numerous newspapers and theatrical reviews, Nana feels the need to display herself to the elite Parisian social scene through

hosting a dinner party at her home. The scene begins with Nana managing every detail and decoration to make sure the dining and living room are prepared to receive some of Paris' finest men and women. As the party progressed, the seemingly refined invitees become loud and raucous:

Le champagne, qu'on buvait depuis le potage, animait peu à peu les convives d'une ivresse nerveuse. On finissait par se moins bon tenir. Les femmes s'accoudaient en face de débandade du couvert; les hommes, pour respirer, recélaient leur chaise... On plaisantait très haut, on gesticulait, au milieu des questions restées sans réponse (Zola 122).

The mixture of alcohol and unfamiliarity together created a volatile cocktail that caused the society women to exhibit questionable manners and the men to become noisy and aggressive. With Vandevres, Nana expressed her discontent with the events of the night:

On s'était fichu d'elle pendant le souper, on avait dit des horreurs pour monterer qu'on la méprisait. Un tas de salopes qui ne lui allaient pas à la cheville! Plus souvent qu'elle se donnerait encore du tintouin, histoire de se faire bêcher ensuite! (Zola 129)

During the meal, the women, now drunk and ungraceful, were spewing insults and judgments about Nana to show how much they despised her. Now, rather than Nana being the subject of scrutiny and judgment, she has become the most elegant, and sober, member among the room of raucous bourgeois men and women. The ladies were behaving so poorly and out of character that Nana did not even see them fit to clean her shoes, a task reserved for the low and uneducated. People exhibit altered behaviors as

they cope and interact with uncomfortable and unnatural settings. Zola's use of behavioral contrast tests the limits of social systems and shows the environment is a socializing factor and that any attempts to emerge from one's determined state are met with struggle, transformation, and consequence.

Nana the Character

In his first outline of the novel, Zola described Nana as:

Corruption from below...which the ruling classes allow to form and which later rises up, corrupting and disintegrating the ruling classes. Nana is the golden fly feeding on a carcass, who later poisons all whom she stings (Berg and Martin 138).

From her first moments on stage as La Blonde Vénus, Nana blinded the world with her illuminating presence as she embarked on her mission to rise from her class and corrupt men of the bourgeois. She poisons those around her with her infectious aura and sows the seeds of inevitable psychological destruction through extracting men's good nature and sanity. In the following section, I will observe Nana the character from several of Zola's corporeal descriptions and conclude with the analysis of her relationships with Count Muffat and Georges.

In this first description of her appearance, Zola highlights Nana's pride in her body:

Nana était nue. Elle était nue avec une tranquille audace, certaine de la toute-puissance de sa chair. Une simple gaze l'enveloppait ; ses épaules rondes, sa gorge d'amazone dont les pointes roses se tenaient levées et rigides comme des lances, ses larges hanches qui roulaient dans un balancement voluptueux, ses cuisses de blonde grasse, tout son corps se devinait, se voyait sous le tissu léger, d'une blancheur d'écume (47).

In this excerpt, the narrator describes how Nana is unashamed exposing her voluptuous physique and feels a tranquility and comfort in being nude. To reflect her narcissism and pride, even Nana's chest and hips extended towards the audience, to invite them to touch and feel the curves and angles of her soft, rosy body. By lengthening her neck like an Amazonian goddess, she extends herself to expose more skin. Her rolling hips symbolize movement, which she seeks through using her sexual prowess to achieve status among the bourgeois men and women of the elite Parisian social scene.

Her daily ritual consists of covering herself in perfume, powdering her body, and examining each of her curves, as if to find a new part of her to be proud of:

Elle ne gardait que le souci de sa beauté, un soin continuel de se visiter, de se laver, de se parfumer partout, avec l'orgueil de pouvoir se mettre nue, à chaque instant et devant n'importe que, sans avoir a rougir" (Zola 326).

In this excerpt, Nana's only worry is the preservation of her body and the continuous need to wash and scent herself to stay desired. When she is not on stage or in bed with a customer, she admires her reflection in the mirror and neglects real responsibilities, such as her crumbling financial situation or her young, sick son. As a prostitute, Nana must

take care of her body to stay attractive to her customers and meet their physical expectations. Also, she must maintain an attractive appearance if she wishes to compete among the traditionally beautiful and sophisticated women of the French bourgeoisie class.

Although Nana had many romantic and sexual interactions with men of the bourgeois class, her relationships with Count Muffat and Georges Hugon demonstrate her manipulative allure and destructive power. Both men become infected by Nana from the temptations of her body, and each lover succumbs to a tragic fate as they crumble from bearing the weight of their beloved obsession. Many diseases consume their host in a series of stages. It is clear that as each man becomes more involved with Nana, he transitions from an aristocratic gentleman to an infatuated lover, until he is psychologically or physically consumed by deep obsession and desire.

In his seat at *La Blonde Vénus*, the bashful and stately Count Muffat struggled to maintain his poise and composure, and his awestruck response to Nana's breathtaking performance foreshadows Count Muffat's eventual obsessive and destructive relationship with the young prostitute. In attempts to dissuade his inevitable attraction to the young starlet, Count Muffat attempts to retain his dignity through his profound religious principles and devotion to familial values. Despite these honorable convictions, the Count cannot control his carnal desires, and ultimately becomes one of Nana's bourgeois pursuits.

Seduced by Nana's physical beauty, the vulnerable Count shared his most private experiences and secrets, such as his financial status, intimate insecurities, and his

unshaken loyalty. Although the Count already had a wife whom he was cheating on, his obsession for Nana grew so strong that he wished to be her only lover and provider.

When it became clear that Nana would not honor this request, rather than upholding his desire for monogamy, the Count decided it would be better to share Nana than to not have her at all. Despite coming to terms with her wishes, stumbling upon Nana in bed with his father, Marquis de Chouard, set Count Muffat off into a psychological breakdown:

Muffat demeurait devant cette porte fermée, dans le foudroiement de ce qu'il venait de voir. Son frisson grandissait, un frisson qui lui montait des jambes dans la poitrine et dans le crâne. Puis, comme un arbre secoué par un grand vent, il chancela, il s'abattit sur les genoux, avec un craquement de tous les membres. Et les mains désespérement tendues, il balbutia, 'C'est trop, mon Dieu! C'est trop (Zola 449)!

The Count froze in front of the open door, revealing his beloved Nana proudly lying naked beside his father in the bed they shared only the day before. Nana, often described as golden and luminescent, was now a violent bolt of lightening and destruction that struck the Count from his legs, through his heart, and finally, his skull. He shivered and shook like a tree in a powerful windstorm until his limbs collapsed and left him convulsing on his knees. Reaching out to God to reclaim his once religious convictions, the Count's final coherent words expressed his utter disbelief and disgust at this unthinkable vision. The Count is taken away and never would regain the level of sanity he once possessed before being inoculated by Nana's tempestuous spirit.

Georges Hugon, a seventeen-year-old boy, was strictly advised by his mother to not mingle with women of Nana's profession and class. Despite her disapproval, Georges spent great amounts of time with Nana strolling through the gardens at night or escaping to her home without telling the guardsmen where he was going. With Georges, Nana felt like different than she did in bed with her usual clientele of egotistical, middle aged men:

C'était, sous la caresse de cette enfance, une fleur d'amour reflorissant chez elle, dans l'habitude et le dégoût de l'homme. Il lui venait des rougeurs subites, un émoi qui la laissait frissonnante, un besoin de rire et de pleurer, toute une virginité inquiétée, traversée de desirs, dont elle restait honteuse. Jamais elle n'avait éprouvé cela (Zola 195).

Georges' love was a sweet caress in contrast to Nana's abusive relationship with the actor, Fontan. Nana feels the unexpected sentiments of joy and happiness, provoking her to laugh and smile whenever she is around her young lover. If Nana were a flower, she would have been barren and stripped of her petals, the botanical parts used to attract male pollinators, each time she shared herself with a new man. With Georges however, she felt like a virginal flower bud, emerging from the root untouched with all her virtue encased in her blooming floral envelope. Zola describes Nana being uncomfortable and confused with these unfamiliar emotions, as she forgot what it felt like to be an innocent young girl.

After dabbling long enough with her inexperienced lover, Nana decides to pursue relations with more mature and established men. Despite her numerous refusals, Georges was unable to eradicate the irrevocable desire for Nana from his heart. Zola describes the

young boy as unable to live without Nana and possessing “une adoration sensuelle, ou tout son être se donnait” (426). Georges’ body, consumed by overwhelming adoration, arrived at Nana’s home to propose in a last effort to obtain her love. After his second proposal, Nana attempts to shut the door when Georges props it open to allow her to see his self sacrifice for love:

Elle lança la porte. D’une main, il la rouvrit, tandis qu’il sortait l’autre main de la poche, avec les ciseaux. Et, simplement, d’un grand coup, il se les enfona dans la poitrine. Cependant, Nana avait eu conscience d’un Malheur; elle s’était tournée.

Quand elle le vit se frapper, elle fut prise d’une indignation (Zola 427).

Georges holds the door open with one hand and takes a sharp pair of Nana’s scissors out of his pocket. With a blow of hammer-like force, he pierces through the flesh of his chest, as drops of blood dripped from the site of the puncture of passion. It is not uncommon for men to exhibit irrational behavior in front of Nana, such as the Count’s penetrating kiss on the young woman’s neck in her dressing room. The young boy is carried away, dead, while Nana regained her composure only moments after his body left the room.

It seems as if Nana went through her life successfully climbing the social scene and prevailing with her tools of sexuality and beauty seemingly unscathed. The novel ends on a less positive note, as the young starlet is dealt with a gruesome death by small pox, a disease that transforms the body into a fleshy mass of sores and puss. The following sections present the biological, historical, and social implications of small pox, and this chapter will conclude with an analysis of Zola’s function of disease .

Portrait of Small Pox

After pages describing Nana's pursuit of men and social status, the final chapter of the novel chronicles her deteriorating physique from small pox, *la variole*, in scientific and graphic detail. The finite origin of small pox is indeterminate, but scientists believe the disease appeared around 10,000 BC, at the time of the establishment of agricultural settlements in northeastern Africa (Riedel 1). Earliest versions of small pox did not show the characteristic evidence of unsightly skin lesions until the 18th and 20th Egyptian Dynasties. Ultimately, the small pox considered most similar to that described in Zola's work was introduced to Europe in the 5th and 7th centuries and greatly affected the developing Western Civilization. Through various conquests of expansion and war, the disease traversed borders and reached the eastern coasts of North America. Used as a biological warfare both in the novel and in practice, small pox proved to be a lethal enemy of all levels of society. "In 18th century Europe, 400,000 people died annually of smallpox, and one third of survivors went blind" (Riedel 1). Those fortunate to survive exhibited disfiguring scars at the site of each lesion. In 1870, small pox claimed the lives of 10,331 in Paris and 2,777 deaths in 1871. *Nana*, published in 1880, trailed the height of the epidemic by only a decade. No cure for small pox existed until Edward Jenner made the first advancements towards inoculation in 1796.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, two clinical forms of smallpox exist. The most severe and common form, *Variola major*, produces an extensive rash and fever in addition to raised bumps on the face and body (Smallpox Disease Overview).

Within Variola major, there are four subtypes, which range from more frequent to rare. The most common form is *ordinary*, found in 90% or more of cases. *Modified Variola major* occurs in a mild form in previously vaccinated persons, and finally *flat* and *hemorrhagic Variola major* are rare and extremely severe. Death rates from Variola minor, the second clinical form, are recorded as 1% or less.

It appears that Nana perishes from the hemorrhagic subtype from Zola's description of her as "un charnier, un tas d'humeur et de sang, pelletée de chair corrompue, jetée la, sur un coussin"(Zola 474). Un charnier/mass grave and une pelletée/shovelful are lexical references to the already astounding small pox death toll that Nana now belongs to. The faint candlelight illuminates her face to reveal a bloody corpse, with raised, button like projections that ooze a muddy substance and destroy her once intoxicating beauty.

The other two diseases mentioned in this thesis, syphilis and HIV/AIDS are classified as sexually transmitted diseases. Although small pox is not primarily contracted through sexual intercourse, it can be spread through close contact or body fluids. Also, small pox may be passed from person to person through the communal use of intimate objects, such as bed linens and clothing. As Nana is a prostitute, the notion that she would contract small pox from fomites, substances capable of carrying infectious organisms, seems plausible.

In Zola's Naturalism, he chose to incorporate "the baser aspects of life, including incest, insanity, and disease"(Berg and Martin 13). In Hatzefeld's broad discussion of Naturalism, he references "l'obsession de la fatalité de la maladie", the obsession with

the fatality of disease. By Nana dying at the end of the novel from small pox abides by the preoccupation with illness and mortality as described in these two secondary sources. Finally, unlike diseases that use animal vectors to transmit infectious bacteria and viral particles, small pox is only passed through infected humans. This is a characteristic to remember during the final section of this chapter: *Nana's Death*.

Nana's Death

According to Berg and Martin, "Zola's narration is generally devoid of direct comments, judgments, predictions, generalizations, and conclusions about the characters and events" (128). Thus, the Naturalist author refrains from including personal bias or opinions, but instead, allows the text and characters' dialogues tell the story. In Nana's final scene, her death by small pox is not a moral punishment for her sexuality and promiscuity, but a potential, plausible consequence for those of the lower class who seek social mobility and status. By using her sex appeal and physical attributes, Nana has the power to manipulate others in the pursuit of her goals. Through contracting small pox, a disease that transforms the flesh into crusty, pus-filled lesions, Nana can no longer rely on her body and beauty to manipulate men and impress sophisticated society. As one of her most cherished daily moments, Nana undresses herself and observes the reflection of her body:

Un des plaisirs de Nana était de se déshabiller en face de son armoire à glace, où elle se voyait en pied. Elle faisait tomber jusqu'à sa chemise; puis, toute nue, elle s'oubliait, elle se regardait longuement (Zola 223).

Taking pleasure in gazing at the curvature of her physique, it is clear that she takes pride in her aesthetic value. Standing naked in front of a mirror is often something that people loath, but Nana gets lost in every ripple of flesh on her rosy, powdered body.

The last scene of the novel greatly reflects the theatricality in the opening pages. Constructed like the finale of a play, the characters congregate around Nana's deathbed, the figurative stage, to bid farewell to the once infectious, now infected actress. Contrasting the elaborate lighting schemes used in major theatre productions, her final act is illuminated by a single candle. She is no longer the beautiful, golden fly, but a corpse of rotting flesh only a maggot could desire:

C'était un charnier, un tas d'humeur et de sang, une pelletée de chair corrompue, jetée là, sur un coussin. Les pustules avaient envahi la figure entière, un bouton touchant l'autre; et, flétries, affaissées, d'un aspect grisâtre de boue, elles semblaient déçus une moisissure de la terre, sur cette bouille informe, où l'on ne retrouvait plus les traits (Zola 474).

Zola describes Nana's deathbed as a mass grave of various infections and symptoms. Her once perfumed and powdered flesh is now bathed in bloody discharge and oozing pus. The characteristic small pox pustules invade the crevices and lines of her face as the unsightly lesions engulf her previously delicate face. Her physical powers fade, sag, and become mud-like, as she more closely resembles a fungus or mold than an actual human

being. Nana has lost all of her vitality and signature passion, as her spirit and body are rendered unrecognizable by the great small pox. The most powerful and convicting words in this description are “chair corrompue.” Zola’s precise lexicon explicitly states that Nana’s skin is corrupted by small pox, just as she did the same to Count Muffat’s stately composure and Georges’ naïveté and innocence. Nana can no longer dazzle audiences on the stage as La Blonde Vénus, mingle with the bourgeois at dinner parties or horse races, or tantalize men in the bedroom as she is eliminated from society by this fatal sentence.

In their analysis of the relationship between disease and history, Frederick Cartwright and Michael Biddiss reveal a striking characteristic of the category of disease that includes small pox:

These diseases have become tamed in their original habitat by acquired resistance of the human to the infecting organism but have returned to their ancient virulence when accidentally transmitted to unaccustomed communities by immigrants such as explorers, missionaries or traders (63).

This quality of small pox implies that exotic human vectors transmit disease from the original community to unrelated and separate groups. Nana does not come from the bourgeois class, nor is she accustomed to the social standards and behaviors of the elite. Her presence in the theatrical and noble circle is unnatural, and she is bound to introduce new dilemmas and agents to challenge the existing social architecture. Her infection with small pox mimics the transmission mechanisms of small pox, as the virus travels via human vector from person to person, and Nana is a viral reservoir in the sophisticated Petri dish of 19th- century France. The final sentences of *Nana* confirm this hypothesis:

Il semblait que le virus pris par elle dans les ruisseaux, sur les charognes tolérées, ce ferment dont elle avait empoisonné un peuple, venait de lui remonter au visage et l'avait pourri (Zola 475).

Just as Nana infiltrated the bourgeois social scene as an exotic contagion, her goals to escape her determined social rank are futile and she perishes from her own poison.

Deborah Lupton acknowledges that disease is often used “as a sign of an individual’s inability to escape from a destined fate” and “a recurrent metaphor for social or moral decay” (55). This logic can be applied to *Nana* as her death by small pox follows an entire plot of a desire for social mobility and altering one’s heredity and determined state. In *Nana*, Zola watched Nana torment and trample the hearts and bodies of many men, while she interacted in the foreign environment of bourgeois society. The whole novel could have followed the same course of corruption and destruction, until finally, Nana is rendered unable to consume any more lovers and dies of small pox in a dusty hotel room, surrounded by bourgeois women. As Zola was an author sympathetic to the plight of the marginalized and judged, writing Nana’s death in such a gruesome fashion is not a judgment on her character, but a commentary on the dangers and consequences of exclusive bourgeois society. Although she tried to become sophisticated through mingling with the upper class, her attempts to keep up appearances and use her body to gain elite status are futile as she rapidly decays.

It is very possible that Nana would have picked up small pox naturally based on her profession and historical context, but its juxtaposition with themes of social mobility and physical obsession show that disease has a function beyond the physical. Nana’s

infection with small pox is a consequence for her exploitation of beauty, sex, and affection in hopes of gaining entry and acceptance in higher social circles. She is a viral immigrant to the bourgeois class, and her death by small pox prevents her from attempting to emerge from the gutters of prostitution and disrupting the elite social class through her sexuality and beauty.

Chapter 3: AIDS and Writing in *Le Protocol Compassionnel*

Introduction

In the novel, *Angelic Echoes*, Ralph Sarkonak defines AIDS writing:

A work of literary creation in which the author describes, through a fiction, the physical and mental pain of living with AIDS based on direct personal experience; although such a work is fictional, it is nonetheless based on first-person testimony by a witness whose name is identical with that of the author (156-157).

The previous two chapters of *Beyond the Physical* analyzed the function of disease in *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana*, two 19th- century works written by observant narrators. As HIV/AIDS became a disease of epidemic concern in the late 20th century, the genre of AIDS literature was born. With this new literary aesthetic came a shift from omniscient, third person narration to intimate, diary entries written from a first-person perspective, often the seropositive author. Scholars of AIDS literature acknowledge that writing about this disease “has allowed for textual modes that undermine the metadiscourse of scientific rationalism and that attempt to reconceptualize disease and the body in terms of the subject’s relationship to language” (Piggford 179). Balzac and Zola’s writings both contained scientific nuances and medical references. The genre of AIDS literature uses the act of writing and associating language with physical suffering and emotion to

textualize a condition that remains enigmatic despite advancements in medical science and treatments.

Le Protocol Compassionnel is the second installment in a trilogy of AIDS diaries. The novel chronicles the narrators plight with AIDS and his quest to participate in the clinical trial of the newest, at the time, antiretroviral drug DDI. The narrator documents his day-to-day life while he observes his body rapidly deteriorating and becoming even more fragile. As he copes with his social and medical diagnosis of AIDS, he feels somewhat relieved of his affliction through writing and reflecting on what it means to have AIDS and how one can still feel alive despite an anticipated death. The end of the novel is left open ended as the narrator returns from seeking alternative therapies in Tunisia to announcing his plan to direct a film to continue documenting his life with AIDS. In summary, Guibert's *Le Protocol Compassionnel* depicts the narrator's emotional oscillation between hoping for survival and coming to terms with death.

This chapter explores the genre of AIDS literature and its goals to immortalize an authors story despite his impending death through writing and readership. The next section discusses the biological aspects of HIV/AIDS and the social stigma surrounding the disease. Finally, I analyze how Hervé Guibert's writing of AIDS in *Le Protocol Compassionnel* humanizes the disease and uses literature as a therapeutic remedy for physical and mental suffering.

AIDS Literature

Authors living with HIV/AIDS developed semi-autobiographical accounts of their personal experiences and struggles with the disease. The autobiographical nature of the AIDS diary “gives priority to a witnessing impulse over the memorializing function” (Chambers 5). Authors are documenting their plight with AIDS to create literature that will tell their stories and perpetuate their survival once their bodies have succumbed to the viral infection. Ross Chambers interprets AIDS writing:

And it serves, finally, to underscore that meaning by making the dramatic gesture of collaborating with a loathsome disease as to produce “the writing of AIDS”, a gesture that then stands as the preferable alternative to submitting passively to the social assessment of one’s worth as a pariah and a victim- an expendable individual who might just as well disappear (27).

By writing about AIDS, the infected author signifies his choice of “refusing to be a consenting social victim and to go quietly, in a way that it seems evident, most of the people one meets would wish”(Chambers 27). In the medical community, AIDS is often associated as an epidemic syndrome that needs to be eliminated, whereas AIDS literature encourages authors with the disease to write about their condition and not succumb to the pressures of suicide and stigma (Piggford 170).

AIDS literature anchors itself in producing a truthful and honest account of living with AIDS. In *Angelic Echoes*, Ralph Sarkonak quotes Judith Pastore’s view on the duty of AIDS writing, “ ‘One of the earliest tasks literary AIDS took on was combating the

multiple untruths and prejudices surround the disease' ” (159). According to AVERT, the leading international HIV/AIDS charity and advocacy organization, the first recognized cases of AIDS occurred in the early 1980s when “a number of gay men in New York and California suddenly began to develop rare opportunistic infections and cancers that seemed stubbornly resistant to any treatment”(HIV & AIDS Stigma and Discrimination). Before the term “AIDS” existed, medical authorities linked the disease to its initial occurrence in gay men by calling it “gay compromise syndrome”, or “GRID (gay-related immune deficiency)”(HIV & AIDS Stigma and Discrimination). As the hysteria of an impending AIDS epidemic heightened, homophobia and the irrational fear of “catching AIDS” became a widespread response. Ross Chambers criticizes the treatment of AIDS patients as casually contagious:

The irrationality of treating an AIDS patient as contagious has its most likely source in the historical accident that has associated AIDS with homosexuality in Western societies and in the homophobic myth that views homosexuality as contagious: not just a disease, like AIDS, that can be transmitted but one you can “catch” from simple social contact with gay people (25).

This criticism of AIDS patients explains how the public was more afraid of becoming homosexual than becoming infected with AIDS. Although the determining factor of one’s homosexuality is debated, it is undisputable that “HIV disease is of course, non contagious: it can be transmitted only under very specific conditions” (Chambers 25).

In *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, Guibert writes his experiences with friends who believed that AIDS could be transmitted from person to person by the sharing a drinking, thus pursuing the goal of AIDS literature in debunking the lies and showing the truth:

Depuis plusieurs années... quand tu t'est mis à regarder nos verres sur la table avec inquiétude, comme si tu avais peur qu'ils se mélangent, à l'époque on ne savait pas trop comment ça attrapait ce machin-là. Louise dit que le sida est un microbe, qu'on va trouver comment le zigouiller" (119).

By addressing the lie and including these falsehoods in his writing, Guibert "enters the space of the lie- not (just) to get at the truth- but rather to play with the idea of the truth in order to illustrate just how problematic such a notion is in this age of AIDS" (Sarkonak 160). Writing about these lies against an autobiographical diary allows Guibert to demystify the disease of AIDS and address the inaccuracies used to create hysteria and social stigma.

To help his readers fully understand the true struggle and reality of living with AIDS, Guibert wrote transparent entries that would shock his reader. According to Ralph Sarkonak, "no detail concerning his own body, however intimate, will be beyond the pale of what he will seemingly disclose." His graphic description of his *fibroscopie*, or endoscopy, provides a detailed description of the pain and discomfort one experiences during the invasive procedure:

Elle me vaporise quelques jets de Xylocaïne au fond de la gorge, et aussitôt un apprenti affolé... me bourre la bouche avec ce gros tuyau noir et force le passage de la lchette pour le pousser à l'intérieur. J'étouffe, je ne supporte pas ce

tuyau...jusqu'à ce qu'il arrive dans l'estomac, j'ai des spasmes, des contractions...je veux le rejeter, le cracher, le vomir (67).

As his physician administers his anesthesia, not even its numbing capacities can dull the nauseating reaction the narrator is about to experience. Next, the doctor stuffs a large black hose down his throat, to pass through his mouth and delve deeper into the cavernous esophagus. Despite his light sedation, the narrator's body tries to expel the foreign object out his body, inducing violent spasms and contractions that make the process increasingly more uncomfortable. By using an aggressive lexicon of action verbs, Guibert textualizes the narrator's agony and poignantly portrays an unimaginable pain.

In *Facing It*, Ross Chambers addresses the open-endedness of AIDS diaries:

Such diaries always come to an end, of course, but they do so without concluding: there is just a final entry, followed by a white space (and usually in front-pr backmatter, an account of the author's death). Thus, their end, in spite of the author's death that it signifies, remains *suspended*, as if another entry were always possible and as if to propose, propose, therefore, some possibility of continuation (7).

The final page of *Le Protocol Compassionnel* is a blank space with the exception of five short lines, suggesting that there is more of the story to come. This idea of "suspension" and prolonging one's story is supported by the notion of survivorship. Chambers continues to expand this idea:

A dying subject can anticipate the possibility of a certain form of textual survival, the condition of which is, as we've seen, the death of the author; so the live

understood now as a representation that implies- as all mediation does- readability and so an orientation toward readership, can thus come to figure something like the *condition of survival* that determines the AIDS diary's ability to prolong its act of witnessing beyond the author's demise (9).

AIDS diaries have the ability to survive beyond their authors' death through readership. These immortalized accounts of suffering and pain honor the writers who chose to live with AIDS and write it, rather than choosing the alternatives of victimhood and defeat. These diaries are the authors literary widows and will continue to witness medical advancement, social perceptions, and the individual's intimate plight with AIDS. The following sections of this chapter examine HIV/AIDS from a biological and social perspective and Guibert's use of writing AIDS as therapy.

Portrait of HIV/AIDS

HIV, human immunodeficiency virus, is the virus that causes the infection and destruction of CD4 cells, the infection-fighting agents of the immune systems. The virus decreases the ability of the immune system to fight back against the foreign particles and combat future infections. HIV becomes AIDS when the infected individual has a CD4 count of less than 200 cells/mm³ or the presence of one or more opportunistic infections. The CD4 count of a healthy individual ranges from 500 to 1,600 cells/mm³, thus the progression from HIV to AIDS inflicts severe immune dysfunction.

One can contract AIDS through bodily fluids via two modes of transmission: sexual intercourse (vaginal and anal) and sharing of syringes and needles for recreational drug use. "HIV is spread through blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, and breast milk"(Global Statistics). It is also possible to acquire HIV through flawed blood transfusions, but that mode of transmission does not required the intimate and sexual contact of the aforementioned ways. When HIV/AIDS became an epidemic in the 1980s, many feared that the disease could be spread through casual contact. This is untrue as HIV cannot be spread through air, water, saliva, sweat, or sharing common surfaces, such as toilet seats and drinking fountains.

HIV belongs to a special class of retroviruses, which have the ability to convert viral RNA into DNA. Normally, DNA is transcribed into RNA, but HIV corrupts this process in order to weaken its host through the production of new HIV proteins and enzymes. A retrovirus begins to replicate itself by attaching and entering the cell, shedding its outer covering, and releasing a viral RNA particle to be taken over by an enzyme called reverse transcriptase (HIV & AIDS Stigma and Discrimination). Reverse transcriptase uses RNA as a template for DNA, and makes it possible for viral RNA to be grafted onto normal, cellular DNA. This process replicates the viral genome, or information, and alters a cell's DNA. This enigmatic process leads to the transcription and translation of viral proteins, which overwhelm and infect the host cells.

When one becomes infected with HIV/AIDS, he or she receives a severe physical and social diagnosis. As Ross Chambers describes:

The affliction of AIDS thus tends to entail the proverbial double whammy: it is a serious disease with a fatal prognosis, and the patient simultaneously lives a social and political nightmare that can have various names, among them underdevelopment, poverty, prejudice, moralism, and homophobia” (17).

In addition to AIDS being hard to bear in itself, “it afflicts populations that are historically disadvantaged: . . . in the West—members of socially underprivileged and/or stigmatized groups: minority groups, IV drug users, hemophiliacs, gay men”(Chambers 17). In 2014 the CDC identified that, “Gay and bisexual men make up about 2% of the overall population (in the United States), but account for approximately two-thirds of all new HIV infections each year.” The prevalence of AIDS among the gay community has contributed to the Western association of HIV infection with homosexuality, and thus “homosexuality as a synonym for morbidity”(Piggford 172). Although many authors in AIDS literature are self-defined gay men, they are in no way nullifying or writing to “marginalize the experiences of other communities coping with AIDS. . . AIDS theory speaks in many ways for a cultural minority, made up of gay men and others”(Piggford 172).

The fear surrounding the emerging HIV epidemic in the 1980s persists today through these social determinants of health: homophobia, stigma, and discrimination. The effects of homophobia can have damaging effects on the health of gay men, such as affecting their ability to get and keep health insurance, contributing to poor mental health and unhealthy behaviors, such as substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, and suicide, and finally, demonstrating a reluctance to seek medical attention and antiretroviral

therapies when needed (Gay and Bisexual Men's Health). Stigma varies depending on the dominant transmission routes in the country or region. In some regions, heterosexual sex is the main route of infection, but in North America and Europe, the conflation of AIDS and homosexuality work to perpetuate homophobic stereotypes and discrimination (Piggford 172).

The social stigma of having HIV/AIDS manifests itself in the infected individual and often results in the loss of hope and feelings of worthlessness, a desire to commit suicide, and reluctance for community interaction for fear of spreading the condition (HIV & AIDS Stigma and Discrimination). Although science and medicine have yet to find a cure for HIV/AIDS, the barriers of stigma, discrimination, and homophobia make ending the global epidemic even more difficult and disappointing.

The final section of this chapter focuses on Guibert's *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, as its narrator comes to terms with his condition, copes with his suffering, and engages himself with others with the hope of survival. Thus, it is through writing AIDS that one emerges from social and self-inflicted stigma and finds the humanizing and therapeutic function of literature.

Disease in the Death Narrative

AIDS literature has changed the conversation surrounding disease to address key affected populations and help outsiders understand that the feelings of suffering and pain of AIDS are universal to all seropositive individuals, not just the homosexual community.

In *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, Guibert documents the narrator's suffering in a way that humanizes the disease through describing its effect on daily life and uses writing as a therapeutic remedy to the physical and mental symptoms of living with AIDS that traditional medicine fails to cure.

The first chapter of the novel begins with the narrator describing how his affliction with AIDS has made the very basic tasks of everyday life difficult and strenuous. The narrator laments:

Perdant chaque jour un geste que j'étais capable de produire la veille, souffrant à lever le bras pour me coiffer, éteindre le plafonnier de la salle de bains, mettre ou enlever la manche d'un habit, ne pouvant plus courir depuis déjà longtemps pour attraper un autobus, ça devient une hantise de monter la marche en m'agrippant à la barre puis de me relever du siège pour descendre à la station, impossible d'ouvrir la vitre d'un taxi...(Guibert 11).

As each day passes, the narrator loses the ability to perform a task that he used to be able to manage. He can't even raise his arms to brush his hair, turn off the ceiling fan, or change his clothes without experiencing bouts of pain and agony. He can no longer run to catch the bus, as his legs and muscles are weakened by the infection. However, even if he managed to catch the bus, leaving his seat to get off at the station is difficult without a sturdy bar to lean on. By listing these everyday behaviors, Guibert shows that the AIDS virus has a very present role in the simple tasks of daily existence. The disease is not reserved for only homosexual men, drug users, and sex workers as early discourse

believed, but can affect any human who brushes his hair, changes his clothes, rides the bus, and any other quotidian task.

The narrator also tried to liken his AIDS suffering and corporal deterioration to that of the survivors of Auschwitz:

Il n'y avait pas de jour où je ne découvrais une nouvelle ligne inquiétante, une nouvelle absence de chair sur la charpente, cela avait commencé par une ligne transversale sur les joues, selon certains reflet qui l'accusaient, et maintenant l'os semblait sortir hors de la peau... j'ai l'impression qu'il va s'en sortir puisque des gens sont bien revenues d'Auschwitz, d'autres fois il est clair qu'il est condamné, en route vers la tombe, inéluctablement (Guibert 18-19).

As he looks at himself in the mirror, the narrator finds new areas of his body where the flesh has sunk in and exposes the shape of his bones. He is emaciated, weak, and frail. The last sentence is his hope that as the victims of Auschwitz survived and were set free from oppression and suffering, he can overcome AIDS and become healthy once again. By likening his plight with AIDS to an iconic historical event, Guibert is trying to show that AIDS is not this enigmatic concept, but an institution of human suffering under many names.

According to AVERT, the antiretroviral drug DDI was made available to people with AIDS in 1989, even though only preliminary tests had been completed. *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, published in 1991, discusses the narrator's desire to enter the continuing clinical trials, despite the drug's negative side effects and fatal toxicity:

La seule solution que je voie serait d'essayer de vous faire entrer dans un protocole à double aveugle sur les doses: soit doses fortes, soit doses faibles, vous n'en savez rien et je n'en sais rien, mais vous savez les doses faibles font quelque chose...Les doses fortes aussi, les 290 morts américains en témoignant (Guibert 162).

The only solution the narrator sees in his quest for survival is to take part in the double blind clinical trial of DDI. In the double blind approach, neither the patient nor the physician knows if the patient is taking the actual drug or a placebo substitute. For DDI, however, the double blind treatment entails a strong dose or a weak dose. Claudette Dumouchel, the narrator's physician, knows that the weak dose has some effect, but also that the 290 Americans taking the stronger dose died. The death toll is not specific of the sexual orientation of the fatalities, suggesting that not all of the people on the clinical trial were gay. Two weeks prior to being assigned to the clinical trial, the narrator has fifteen vials of blood drawn. Claudette's request that he has his blood re-drawn at a different clinic set the narrator into a depressive state. Although he was ready to give up despite DDI's potentially positive effects, many people in the narrator's life call him to check up on his status:

Le docteur Chandi m'avait rappelé. Claudette Dumouchel m'avait rapplé. Anna avait tenté de joindre le milliardaire américain. Le docteur Nacier m'appelait de l'île d'Elbe, et contactait sur-le-champ un homme puissant qui pouvait me mettre en relation avec le ministre de la Santé. Jules ourdissait le projet de récupérer le DDI du danseur qui venait de tomber dans le coma. Le monde entier se mobilisait

autour de mon désespoir. Et Vincent arrivait à l'heure pour la première fois (Guibert 163).

Three doctors and three friends called to check up on the narrator. One of the doctors even called while on vacation in Italy, offering to connect him with the Ministry of Health. Jules, one of the narrator's friends, proposed to get the DDI elsewhere, knowing a dying dancer with a viable supply. The final sentences are very clear, stating that the narrator's world was rallying around him in his despair. For the first time, Vincent, another friend, referred to the narrator's experience with AIDS as "our story." AIDS patients are often reluctant to seek medical care and community due to immense stigmatization and discrimination. By willingly choosing to take part in a journey that often leaves patients isolated and stigmatized by society, Guibert shows how the narrator's peers are treating him with support and care, rather than discarding him as "someone who deserves to be punished" (HIV & AIDS Stigma and Discrimination).

Despite the potentially positive effects of AIDS medications, the remedies described in *Le Protocol Compassionnel* often do more harm than good. The narrator explains the difficulties when taking new medication:

Il y a quelque chose de bouleversant à prendre un nouveau médicament, après avoir arrêté de prendre l'ancien qui était censé surseoir à ma mort, et après en avoir entendu parler pendant un an, chaque fois de façon contradictoire, parfois comme une vraie manne parfois comme un fléau: d'abord que ça allait sauver les malades, puis qu'on s'apercevait que ça les tuait, puisque'on ne connaissait pas les doses et que c'était la raison pour laquelle ça avait tué des malades (Guibert 21).

It is difficult to switch to a new, unfamiliar medication when the current one seems to be working to delay death. The narrator hears conflicting opinions on this new medication, some believing it's a godsend, and others believing it won't do any good. Once the patients start taking the new drugs, they seem to be doing better, but in actuality, their condition is growing worse because of issues with correct dosage. These shortcomings in scientific advances left AIDS writers to turn to literature for its therapeutic advantages.

In *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, the narrator takes his prescribed AZT medication, participates in a DDI clinical trial, and even travels to Casablanca to prolong his survival and chase a cure for AIDS. Despite following the guidance of medical authority, his immune system continues to deteriorate and his condition worsens. The conventional therapies used to treat AIDS failed the narrator, but through literature, Guibert has found a way to cope. Through contextualizing his agony and pain, Guibert finds therapy in words and their cathartic abilities:

C'est quand j'écris que je suis la plus vivant. Les mots sont beaux, les mots sont justes, les mots sont victorieux, n'en déplaise à David, qui a été scandalisé par le slogan publicitaire: "La première victoire des mots sur le sida." En m'endormant je repense à ce que j'ai écrit pendant la journée, certaines phrases reviennent et m'apparaissent incomplètes, une description pourrait être encore plus vraie (144).

When the narrator is writing he feels the most alive. By proclaiming the beauty, fairness, and victory of words over AIDS, writing about AIDS is more effective at prolonging survival than new medical therapies. By writing an AIDS diary, the author is adopting an

authoritative position over death, suicide, and psychological despair. Ross Chambers confirms this stance by identifying AIDS writing as a gesture of self-decontamination:

The writing of an AIDS diary, as a gesture of self-decontamination, is the first instance of an instrument of contemplating oneself in the abjections of the body and the deficiencies of the spirit to which so dire a personal crisis, psychological as well as spiritual, reduces on, and these last inevitably include moments of internalized homophobia, self-hatred, depression, despair. But it is precisely in this that the writing is self-decontaminating: facing down suicide...(28).

By transmitting his internal suffering to the page, the narrator finds survival through writing. Although he still experiences moments of self-hate, depression, and despair, his words can overcome AIDS in way that medicine has yet to accomplish.

In *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana*, Balzac and Zola objectively write about the function of disease through the death of the infected characters. In *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, Guibert writes about AIDS in a way that pursues the narrator's textual survival through literature as therapy and shows that AIDS is not a disease that gay community, drug users, and impoverished African countries have to cope with on their own. By writing about AIDS, Guibert gives readers, regardless of their sexual orientation, economic status, race, and other socially defined characteristics, the opportunity to learn about and witness AIDS suffering from a personal point of view. Through understanding that it's "our story" not "his/her story", AIDS can be seen as not being an issue for only certain groups to deal with, but an epidemic humanity must confront in solidarity.

Conclusion

Through my research and compilation of historical information, literary analysis, and biological knowledge, I have found that *La Cousine Bette*, *Nana*, and *Le Protocol Compassionnel* identified several functions of disease through writing about the infected individual through the three literary aesthetics of Realism, Naturalism, and AIDS literature.

The realist novel, *La Cousine Bette*, documents the lives of elite Parisian families through verbose descriptions and monomaniac characters with critical obsessions. The Balzacian obsession of Valérie Marneffe is greed, and this desire motivates her to seek prosperous relationships through the exploitation of wealthy individuals. Her graphic death by the sexually transmitted disease, syphilis, is a consequence for her promiscuity and her quest for financial security.

The naturalist novel *Nana* shares the observant view of Realism, but ventures one-step further by employing scientific methods and literary experimentation to produce an extremely detailed and multi sensorial account of reality. The titular character is a Parisian Prostitute who uses her body and beauty to have relationships with men of bourgeois class in hopes of becoming part of elite society. At the end of the novel, Nana is a victim of small pox, destroying her once luminescent complexion and sensual physique. Her affliction with this specific 19th- century epidemic addresses the Naturalist critique of social hierarchy and Nana's desire to emerge from her lower status and infiltrate the bourgeois social scene.

Le Protocol Compassionnel is a work of AIDS literature documenting the experience of a gay man living with AIDS in late 20th century France. In the novel, Guibert omits specifically how the narrator contracted HIV/AIDS, but includes every physical and psychological detail he witnesses day to day. His AIDS diary uses writing as a textual therapy and humanizing agent against the stigma, discrimination, and homophobia surrounding the global epidemic.

Within these three novels, disease has taken on different functions and utilities. In *La Cousine Bette* and *Nana*, disease was used to comment on the consequences of one's actions and pursuits in bourgeois society, whereas the author of *Le Protocol Compassionnel* used literature to write about an individual's suffering and plight with illness. I predict that as this literature continues to explore the function of disease, and as medicine continues to seek treatments to solve and eradicate global epidemics, disease will be discussed from the infected individual's perspective, rather than through an omniscient narrator. Also, I anticipate that the infected individual will be more affected by his relationship with himself, others, and the world, rather than the physical manifestation of disease in and on the body.

In March 2014, Ebola, a deadly hemorrhagic fever, rapidly diffused in countries of West and Central Africa, causing the largest and most complex Ebola outbreak since the virus was discovered in 1976. Through the media, Ebola has grown to become a feared contagion. The public receives most of its information about the disease through urgent news broadcasts and emergency health warnings. Since then, physicians and relief workers have been advised to avoid going to the infected countries and many restrictions

have been placed on international travel to control the spread to the West. The isolation and discrimination appropriated to countries with Ebola reminds me of the same fears and stigmatization surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the gay community.

Literature is a knowledge-building enterprise that has the power to transmit information, influence society's understanding of particular subjects, and be a witness to one's personal experience. As Ebola persists and other epidemics emerge, it will be interesting to see if literature will be used to explore the functions of the disease through the perspective of the infected individual or return to omniscient observation and documentation. As I conclude my thesis, I have grown to appreciate the function of disease in *La Cousine Bette*, *Nana*, and *Le Protocol Compassionnel*, and I look forward to continuing my research as authors explore new epidemics through literature.

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