

Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* presents a dominant female character. Attempt a detailed analysis of this painting in order to explain how the figure appears so powerful.

Bewilderment and criticism have surrounded the “notorious talking point, the extraordinary *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*” (Pollock, 1998:77) since it was submitted for the 1863 Salon. It was rejected by the jury, but shown at what became the Salon des Refusés after the Emperor Louis-Napoleon described the rejected works “to be quite as good as the pictures which had been accepted” (Pool, 1967:73).

The painting was criticised for its “innovative colour and brushwork” (Farrell 2004:1.ii), “summary indication of form without the use of lines, disregard of smooth modelling” (Pool 1967:73), and most obviously its subject matter which Locke describes as an “unthinkable social situation” (1998:125). The picture’s construction “destroys single point perspective by joining foreground and background” (Kierst, 2003:1) and this makes the entire work seem uncomfortable to the viewer, amplifying the awkwardness created by the inclusion of the nude.

The viewer’s attention is also drawn to the nude figure as it is so “bright [...] against a dark background” (Pool 1967:124) but, despite the effects created by the structure of the picture, the nude is clearly part of the picture rather than being disconnected from it as it initially seems. She is seen to be part of the scene as her clothes are mixed with the picnic basket and her leg has intruded on the gesturing man’s personal space. However, despite being part of the group she is also either being ignored by the two men or, more presciently, ignoring them. If she is seen to be ignoring the men, she has chosen to look out at the viewer and engage them directly with the painting.

This engagement presents problems for the viewer as they are forced to question the morality of the scene: whether to consider the nude, naked in a public place and exhibited for public consumption, to be a prostitute which introduces an uncertainty as to whether they are a “passive voyeur or an active consort”

(McCauley 1998:44). Even though the intended reaction to the picture is unclear, it is unquestionably the presence of the nude that controls the viewer's emotional response.

The power of the figure is also emphasised by the enormity of the canvas, especially when it is remembered that paintings of this size would customarily be historical or mythological scenes which were, unlike Manet's controversial image, considered acceptable. The portrayal of the nude also breaks academic conventions as it is painted naturally and not in an idealised manner, a treatment of subject Manet also uses in *Olympia*, which could be seen as parodying works such as the directly contemporaneous *The Birth of Venus* by Cabanel.

All of these devices make the dominant figure in the painting undoubtedly the nude, but the transformation of this particular woman into a work of art does not, here at least, reinforce the male dominance through the female stereotype as described by Parker and Pollock (1981:119). Rather the nude challenges male dominance through her ultimate 'otherness' as an unabashed unclothed female, contrasted to the dressed men and the rest of nature, and in doing so performs the deconstruction that Parker and Pollock see as necessary to address the fundamental sexual difference within patriarchal culture (1981:132ff).

(527 words)

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